NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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With Links of Steel

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With Links of Steel

Nicholas Carter
1904

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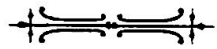
Detective - Nick Carter



WITH LINKS OF STEEL

CHAPTER I.

A CRAFTY ROBBERY.

Mr. Venner, sir?"

"Mr. Venner—yes, certainly. You will find him in his private office—that way, sir. The door to the right. Venner is in his private office, Joseph, is he not?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Garside, unless he has just returned. I saw him go out some time ago."

"Is that so? Wait a moment, young man."

The young man halted, and then turned back to face Mr. Garside, with an inquiring look in his frank, brown eyes.

"Not here, sir, do I understand?" he asked, politely.

Mr. Garside shook his head. He was a tall, slender man of forty, and was the junior partner of the firm of Rufus Venner & Co., a large retail jewelry house in New York City, with a handsome store on Fifth Avenue, not far from Madison Square.

It was in their store that this introductory scene occurred, and proved to be the initiatory step of one of the shrewdest and most cleverly executed robberies on record.

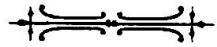
It was about eleven o'clock one April morning. The sun was shining brightly outside, and at the curbing in front of the store were several handsome private carriages, with stiff-backed, motionless coachmen, in bottle-green livery, perched on their boxes, all of which plainly indicated the very desirable patronage accorded the firm mentioned.

In the store the glare of sun was subdued by partly drawn yellow curtains, which lent a soft, amber light to the deep interior, and enhanced the dazzling beauty of the merchandise there displayed.

The store was a rather narrow one, but quite deep, with a long-counter on each side, back of which were numerous clerks, some engaged in waiting upon the several customers then present.

At the rear of the store was an office inclosure, with a partition of plate glass; while at either side of this inclosure was a smaller room, entirely secluded, these being the private offices of the two members of the firm.

Mr. Garside was standing about in the middle of the store when the young man entered and inquired for Mr. Venner. As he turned from the clerk who had informed him of Venner's absence, he added, half in apology, to his visitor:



"I was mistaken, young man. My clerk tells me that Mr. Venner is out just now. Do you know where he has gone, Joseph?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"I think he will presently return," said Garside, again reverting to the caller. "Is there anything that I can do for you? Or will you wait until Mr. Venner comes in?"

"I will not wait, Mr. Garside, since you are one of the firm, and probably know about this matter," replied the young man, drawing a small cloth-covered package from his breast pocket. "Here are the ten diamonds for which Mr. Venner sent us an order this morning. I come from Thomas Hafferman, sir, and will leave the stones with you."

The man mentioned was also a jeweler, and a large importer of diamonds and costly gems.

Mr. Garside's countenance took on an expression of mild surprise.

"From Hafferman? An order from Venner?" he murmured, inquiringly. "I was not aware that Venner sent out any order for diamonds this morning."

"One of your clerks brought the order, sir, and requested Mr. Hafferman to send the stones here as soon as convenient," replied the messenger. "Mr. Hafferman did not know your clerk personally, so I was sent here to deliver the stones."

"What is your name, young man?"

"Harry Boyden, sir. I have worked for Mr. Hafferman for nearly five years. I think you will find that the order was properly sent."

"Wait just a moment, Mr. Boyden," suggested Garside, smiling.

Then he hastened to the rear of the store, and spoke through the open window near the cashier's desk.

"Do any of you know of an order sent out by Mr. Venner this morning?" he inquired, addressing the several clerks at work in the office. "An order to Thomas Hafferman for ten diamonds."

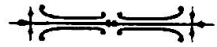
Only a girl stenographer, seated at a typewriter near the office door, replied:

"I think Mr. Venner sent Spaulding out about half an hour ago, sir," she replied. "I saw him give Spaulding several letters."

"Ah, doubtless it's all right enough," bowed Garside; "yet I wonder that I had heard nothing about it. Joseph, has Spaulding been here within a few minutes?"

"No, sir," replied the clerk, the same who had at first been questioned. "I saw him go out just before Mr. Venner departed, and he has not yet returned."

Garside had now reached the middle of the store again, where Boyden was still waiting.



"Are you quite sure that the order came from Mr. Venner?" he again inquired. "How long ago was the messenger at your store?"

"About half an hour ago, sir," Boyden readily answered. "The order was, I presume, signed by Mr. Venner."

"Was it our man Spaulding who delivered the order? Do you know him by sight?"

"I do not, sir. Joseph Maynard, yonder, is the only clerk here with whom I am acquainted, and I think he will vouch for me," said Boyden, now beginning to smile at Garside's manifest caution over receiving the diamonds. "Surely, sir, no harm can come from your keeping the stones until Mr. Venner returns, since I am willing to leave them with you," he added, laughing.

"Oh, no, no—I wasn't thinking of that," Garside quickly answered. "I wished only to avoid the needless trouble of returning them, in case the order did not come from us."

"I think the order was all right, Mr. Garside. Besides, sir, I saw Mr. Venner yesterday at our store, examining some diamonds. Doubtless these are the same."

"Oh, if that's the case, leave them, by all means," Garside cried. "I was not aware that he had called there. Probably they are for some order of which he has personal charge. Yes, yes, Mr. Boyden, leave them, certainly. Here, Joseph, place the package in one of the vault drawers, and hand it to Mr. Venner when he returns. Sorry to have detained you so long, Mr. Boyden. Had you begun by stating that Venner called

yesterday upon Mr. Hafferman, I should not have demurred over the matter."

"There's no harm done, Mr. Garside, none whatever," replied Boyden, bowing and smiling. "I appreciate your caution, sir. If there proves to have been any mistake in ordering them, you can easily return the stones. Good-morning, sir."

Garside replied with a nod over his shoulder, having turned to hand the parcel to his clerk back of the counter, and Boyden immediately departed.

"Is that young man an acquaintance of yours, Maynard?" inquired Mr. Garside.

"Yes, sir. He has been with Hafferman for several years."

"Doubtless it's all right, then. Odd, though, that Venner should have made no mention to me of this order. Hand him the package as soon as he comes in."

"I will, sir, at once."

Maynard had already placed the small parcel in a drawer of the huge steel vault back of the counter, and he now resumed the work at which he had been engaged.

Mr. Garside sauntered toward the front of the store, and presently greeted a lady who entered.

Twenty minutes passed, and the incident of the diamonds was almost forgotten by both employer and clerk.

Soon both were reminded of it, however, by the entrance of another man—a smooth-featured young fellow, with pale blue eyes, a sallow complexion, slightly pock-marked. He was of medium height, and well put together, and was clad in a neat business suit of fashionable appearance.

Quickly approaching Mr. Garside, who was then disengaged, he tendered one of Thomas Hafferman's business cards, and said, glibly, while bowing and laughing lightly:

"Excuse me, Mr. Garside, but we rather owe you an apology. Our Mr. Boyden left some diamonds with you a short time ago, which should have been delivered to Tiffany & Co. Mr. Hafferman read the order without his spectacles, and it's rather a good joke on him, for he thought it was signed Venner & Co. The blunder was partly owing to the fact, no doubt, that Mr. Venner called to see him yesterday about some diamonds."

"There!" exclaimed Garside, as if quite pleased to discover that he had been so nearly right. "I knew well enough that Venner had not sent out any order without mentioning it to me. Yes, your Mr. Boyden left the stones here. For Tiffany & Co., eh?"

"Yes, sir, and they should have been delivered long ago," was the reply, with a conventional laugh. "If you please, I'll leave them there on my way back. Deucedly stupid blunder on Hafferman's part, I'm sure; and I hope—"

"Oh, there's no harm done, I guess, and but little time lost," interrupted Garside, joining in the other's laugh. "You will deliver them, you say?"

"If you please."

"Here, Joseph, hand me that package of diamonds left here by Boyden. They were sent to us by mistake. I knew it well enough at the time. Here you are, Mr. ——"

"Raymond, sir. I am cashier at Hafferman's. Many thanks. Sorry to have troubled you—very sorry."

"No trouble at all," laughed Garside, accompanying Mr. Raymond toward the street door. "The trouble has been all yours, sir."

"That's quite true," smiled Raymond, as he bowed himself out with the package of diamonds in his hand. "But now the pleasure is all mine!" he added to himself, upon reaching the sidewalk.

Then he strode rapidly away, quickly losing himself in the midday stream of people thronging the famous New York thoroughfare.

Less than five minutes later, before any misgivings had crept into the mind of Mr. Garside, the senior member of the firm came hurrying into the store.

"Oh, I say, Venner!" exclaimed his partner, stopping him near the office door. "What diamonds are you thinking of buying of Hafferman?"

"Of Hafferman?" echoed Venner, with a look of surprise.

"Weren't you looking at some stones there yesterday?"

"Yes, certainly. Some very choice diamonds. I want ten of the first water, a little larger and more perfectly matched than any we have in stock at present. But how did you learn that I had called there?"

Mr. Garside quickly informed him of the several incidents of the past half hour, when, to his consternation and dismay a look of sudden apprehension swept over Venner's face.

"Raymond—the name of Hafferman's cashier!" he cried. "Nothing of the sort, Philip. Their cashier is named Briggs. I know him well."

"Briggs! Briggs!"

"Briggs—yes, Briggs!" reiterated Mr. Venner, excitedly. "By Heaven, there must be something wrong here!"

"Dear me! If this Raymond was an impostor, we are done out of—"

"Wait—wait!"

Checking his partner with an impulsive gesture, Venner rushed into his private office and seized his desk telephone, quickly calling up the firm by which the diamonds had been sent.

Garside followed him into the room, only to hear the questions hurriedly asked over the wire by his excited partner,

who presently dropped the telephone and leaped to his feet, crying loudly, so loudly that his voice filled the entire store, and brought all hands hurrying in his direction:

"There's no doubt of it, Garside, none whatever. You have been duped—swindled—robbed of four thousand dollars' worth of gems! Raymond was an impostor—a crook—"

"Venner—hush! You are losing your head," protested Garside, white with dismay. "It's enough that we have lost the stones, so at least keep your head. Waste not a moment. Notify the police. Telephone at once for men from the central office."

"Blast the police! The central office be hanged!" cried Venner, choking down an oath of wrathful contempt. "I'll have none of your police—none of your central office men! I want a detective—not an effigy of one!"

"Rufus—"

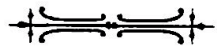
"Silence, Garside, and leave this affair to me," Venner harshly interrupted. "You've had fingers enough in it already."

With which rebuke Mr. Rufus Venner strode passionately out of the office and into the store proper, shouting loudly to the clerk previously mentioned:

"Maynard—here you, Maynard! Call a cab at once and go for Nick Carter! Lose not a moment! Don't wait to ask questions, you blockhead! Away with you, at once! Bring Nick Carter here with the least possible delay!"

Maynard had already seized his coat and hat, and was hurrying out of the store.

And thus began one of the most stirring and extraordinary criminal cases that ever fell within the broad experience of the famous New York detective mentioned.



CHAPTER II.

CONCERNING SEÑORA CERVERA.

Joseph Maynard arrived at Nick Carter's residence just as the famous New York detective was about preparing for lunch, and quickly stated his mission, disclosing the superficial features of the crime.

Nick Carter habitually looked below the surface of things, however, and in trifles he invariably discovered more than the ordinary man. Before Maynard had fairly outlined the case Nick keenly discerned that the robbery could not have been committed by any common criminals, and he at once decided not only that he would take the case, but also that it gave promise of something far more startling than then appeared aboveboard.

Yet even Nick's keen discernment utterly failed, at this early stage of the affair, to anticipate its actual magnitude and tragic possibilities.

Having consented to accompany Maynard to the scene of the crime, Nick turned to Chick Carter, his reliable chief

assistant, who also had been an attentive listener to Maynard's disclosures.

"You had better come with me, Chick," said he. "This affair has rather a bad look, and in case quick work is imperative, I may need your assistance."

"Go with you it is, Nick," Chick heartily cried, hastening to put on his coat and hat.

"From the circumstances disclosed by Maynard, however," added Nick, "I am inclined to think that these rats have very carefully covered their tracks, and that a still hunt for their trail may prove to be our stunt. Yet you had better go along with me."

"I'm ready when you are, Nick."

"Very good. Come on, Mr. Maynard. I see you have a carriage at the door. We will not delay even for lunch, but will snatch a bite later."

Together the three men left the house, and it was precisely one o'clock when Nick was ushered into the private office of Venner & Co., where the two members of the firm then were seated, apparently still engaged in discussing the audacious robbery.

Mr. Rufus Venner, it may be here stated, was a man of about forty years of age, and was a very well-known man about town. Darkly handsome, with an erect and imposing figure, an *habitué* of the best clubs, a man still unmarried, yet of whom hints were frequently dropped that he was very popular

with the fair sex, whom he was known to lavishly entertain at times—this was the senior member of the firm of Venner & Co., and the man who, quickly arose to greet Nick Carter and Chick when the two detectives entered.

"Your clerk has already given me the main facts of the case, Mr. Venner, so we will dispense with any rehearsal of them, and get right down to business," Nick crisply observed, immediately after their greeting. "There are a few questions I wish to ask you, and concise replies may expedite matters."

"I will respond as briefly as possible, Mr. Carter," Venner quickly rejoined, as they took chairs around the office table. "I do not fancy being robbed in this scurvy fashion, sir, and you may go to any reasonable expense to discover and arrest the thieves. Now, Detective Carter, your questions?"

"To begin with," asked Nick, with a steadfast scrutiny of Venner's darkly attractive face, "what is the value of the stolen diamonds?"

"About four thousand dollars."

"Ten in number, I was told."

"Precisely."

"Are they of uniform value?"

"Nearly so. They are splendid gems, and perfectly matched, and are worth about four hundred dollars each. I wanted them for a special purpose, which—"

"Which I will presently arrive at," Nick courteously interposed. "I understand, Mr. Venner, that you called yesterday at the store of Thomas Hafferman and made some inquiries about these stones?"

"I did, and also examined them."

"In what part of Hafferman's store were you at the time?"

"In his private office."

"Were any of the clerks present?"

"Not any—Stay! One of the clerks brought in the diamonds to Mr. Hafferman, but he did not remain. Only Mr. Hafferman himself remained with me while we discussed the matter."

"Do you know the clerk's name?"

"Boyden, I think, he was called."

"The same who brought the diamonds here this morning," put in Mr. Garside. "His name is Harry Boyden."

Nick made a note of it in a small book which he drew from his pocket.

"Did you make any deal at that time regarding the diamonds?" he inquired.

"I only had them reserved for me a day or two, stating that I would either call again or send an order for them, if I decided to purchase them," replied Venner.

"Are you quite sure that only Mr. Hafferman heard you make that statement?"

"Sure only in that the office door was closed, and that he alone was with me. If there were any eavesdroppers about I did not suspect it."

"Naturally not," smiled Nick. "Now, then, for what special purpose did you want those particular diamonds? I think you referred to one."

A slight tinge of red appeared in Venner's cheeks when he replied, a change which by no means escaped Nick's observation.

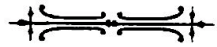
"I wanted the stones, or then thought I might, for a customer who contemplated giving me an order for a valuable diamond cross, to be worn upon the stage. We happen to have in stock no diamonds perfectly adapted to her requirements, and so I called upon Hafferman to learn if he could supply me."

"Who is the customer, Mr. Venner?"

"I do not see how her identity can be at all essential to the investigation of this affair, yet I have no objection to disclosing it," said Venner, frowning slightly.

"Why demur over it, then?" demanded Nick, bluntly.

"Only because of an aversion to bringing the lady into the case, of which she, of course, knows nothing," retorted Venner. "I expected the order from Señora Cervera, the Spanish dancer."



"Ah! Is she not a member of the Mammoth Vaudeville Troupe, which has been playing here to packed houses for several months?"

"She is, yes."

"I have heard that she makes a great display of diamonds."

"That is true, Mr. Carter. She possesses a magnificent collection of jewels, and wears them with an abandon against which I frequently have cautioned her."

"By way of explanation," put in Mr. Garside, with an odd smile, "Venner might add that he enjoys quite friendly relations with the Spanish señora."

"I see no occasion, Garside, for comments upon my interest in Sanetta Cervera," declared Venner, with a frown at his partner. "My relations with her, Detective Carter, are only those of a friend and a gentleman. She called here several weeks ago to have some diamonds reset, when I met her personally, and was deeply impressed with her extraordinary grace and beauty. I since have shown her some attention."

"Quite natural, I am sure," observed Nick, smiling indifferently. "As you remarked, however, none of that appears to be material. I understand, Mr. Venner, that you were absent when Boyden brought the diamonds here this morning."

"I was," bowed Venner. "I received a note from Señora Cervera this morning, asking me to call upon her at eleven o'clock at her rooms, and to bring with me a diamond pendant

which we have in stock, and which I had the pleasure of showing her a few days ago."

"Ah, I see."

"She stated in her note that if I would call upon her at the hour mentioned, she would decide whether to purchase the pendant, or have us make the diamond cross for her."

"You complied with her request, Mr. Venner, and went to call upon her?"

"Certainly."

"Where is she quartered?"

"She rents a furnished house uptown."

"Does she live alone?"

"With her servants only."

"How many?"

"She keeps a butler, a male cook, and two housemaids. Also a girl to look after her wardrobe and act as her dresser at the theater."

"Evidently Señora Cervera is wealthy," said Nick.

"Well, not exactly wealthy," rejoined Venner. "She is the popular craze just now, and from her professional work she derives a very large income which she scatters as if dollars

were dead leaves. In a word, Detective Carter, Señora Cervera is an arrant spendthrift."

"So I have heard," nodded Nick.

"You have?"

"Oh, yes!" laughed the detective. "That appears to surprise you. It will not, when I tell you that there are very few public characters in New York of whose general habits I am not tolerably well informed. Of course, Mr. Venner, you have no doubt of this Spanish dancer's honesty?" Nick added, bluntly.

Venner flushed deeply, and instantly shook his head.

"Most assuredly not," he cried, with some feeling. "Señora Cervera dishonest? Impossible!"

"Improbable, Mr. Venner, no doubt; but not impossible."

"It is, sir," declared Venner, positively. "I know her well. Such an idea is absurd. Drop it at once, Detective Carter. Indeed, sir, if I thought her name was to be dragged into this affair, or her reputation to be in any way imperiled, I would quietly suffer the loss of these diamonds, and cease this investigation at once."

Nick laughed softly, and suppressed the response that, nearly rose to his lips.

"Don't do it, Mr. Venner," said he, complacently. "My observation was not intended to cast any reflection upon Señora Cervera. I have no doubt that she is perfectly honest."

"I should hope not, sir."

"By the way, have you the note she sent to you this morning?"

"Yes. Here it is."

"By mail, or a messenger?"

"A messenger brought it."

"Ah!" murmured Nick, briefly studying the written page. "Plainly a foreign hand. Very firm and forceful. It indicates a strong and determined character. I should say that Señora Cervera is a woman of rare qualities."

"That is perfectly correct, sir. She is a woman of rare qualities."

"What did she decide to do about the diamonds, Mr. Venner?"

"She gave me an order for the cross, Detective Carter, to be made and delivered as soon as possible."

"This was during your call upon her this morning?"

"Certainly."

"You had previously sent no order to Hafferman for the stones?"

"Surely not."

"Yet a written order was received by him, or he would not have delivered the goods."

"In which case, then, it was a forgery."

"No doubt of it," Nick readily admitted. "Chick."

"Yes, Nick."

"Take a carriage and go at once and interview Hafferman. See what you can learn from him. Get the written order received by him, and bring it here. Have a look at young Boyden, and see what you make of him. Also get the written signature of Mr. Hafferman, and that of each person employed in his store. Understand?"

"Sure thing!" nodded Chick, already seeing clearly the line Nick's investigation was taking, though neither Venner nor his partner yet perceived it. "I will return as quickly as possible."

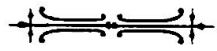
"You will find me here," nodded Nick. "Wait a moment!"

"Well?"

"Also get a description of the party who delivered the written order at Hafferman's store. Inquire what he said at the time, and why he did not attempt securing the diamonds then and there."

"Probably he was not known there, and knew he could not get them," observed Venner, by way of explanation.

Nick made no reply to this, however, and Chick hurriedly departed.



CHAPTER III.

THE KILGORE DIAMOND GANG.

Now, gentlemen, only a few more questions, and I then shall be ready to go at this case in a more energetic fashion," said Nick Carter, immediately after Chick's departure. "Were any of your clerks absent from the store, Mr. Venner, at the time of this robbery?"

"As I was absent myself, I cannot say," replied Venner, rather dryly. "How about it, Garside?—you were here."

"Only one clerk, a young man named Spaulding, was out of the store."

"Was he out on business?"

"Yes, under my instructions," Venner quickly explained. "We have numerous old accounts on our books, and just before I went uptown I sent Spaulding out to try to make a few collections. I think he has returned by this time."

"It does not matter, since he was out under your instructions," said Nick, closing his notebook. "Now, Mr. Venner, who among your employees knew you thought of buying this lot

of diamonds from Hafferman, or that you had called at his store to examine them?"

"Not a soul," was the prompt reply.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely. I had said nothing of the matter, even to my partner, there being nothing definite about it before I saw Señora Cervera this morning. I am sure that none of my clerks had any idea of my intentions."

Nick was not so sure of it, yet he did not say so. He arose and took from Venner's desk a block of plain paper, which he laid upon the table.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I want the signature of your firm, in the handwriting of each of you. Kindly let me have this."

"What's that for?" demanded Venner, abruptly.

"I wish to make a comparison with the forged order which my assistant will presently bring from Mr. Hafferman," Nick coolly explained. "I would suggest that you do not delay me."

Venner made no reply, but took a pen and signed the firm's name upon the blank paper.

"Now yours, Mr. Garside."

"Mine also, Detective Carter?" queried Garside, with a look of surprise.

"If you please."

"Surely," cried Venner, with some resentment, "you do not suspect that Mr. Garside or myself—"

"Pardon me!" Nick bluntly interrupted. "I am not in the habit of discussing my suspicions. That I should suspect either of you, however, is utterly absurd."

"I should say so!"

"Therefore do not argue with me over an absurdity. If I am to continue this investigation, gentlemen, I must do it in my own way. Either that, or I shall drop the case at once. Your signature, Mr. Garside."

Garside hastened to take the pen, and dashed off the firm's signature below that of his partner. Nick tore the page from the block, then handed the latter to Venner.

"Now, Mr. Venner," said he, "have each of your employees, from first to last, write his name with pen and ink upon this paper. Don't overlook one of them, not one, from your bookkeeper down to your office boy. If Spaulding is still out, get his signature later, and send it to me by mail. I will wait here while you are thus engaged."

Venner now vaguely perceived Nick's suspicions and design, and he could not consistently offer any remonstrance. Yet he plainly resented the idea that any of his clerks could have been guilty of co-operation with the criminals who had committed the robbery that morning, and his dark features wore a grim and sullen expression when he took the block of paper and repaired to his main office.

Nick Carter sat and waited, silently sizing up the case as he then saw it.

Just as Venner returned with the numerous signatures, Chick also put in an appearance again, bringing with him the forged order which had been left at Hafferman's store. Nick merely glanced at it, then thrust it into his pocket.

"Did you see Boyden?" he inquired of Chick.

"Yes, and spoke with him," nodded Chick.

"What about him?"

"He looks all right."

"Did you get the signatures of Hafferman and his clerks?"

"They are on this paper."

"Good enough. Let me have those of your employees, Mr. Venner. Are they all here?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Very good," said Nick, putting the several papers into his pocket. "Now, Chick, what of the man who visited Hafferman's store with the forged order?"

"He merely left the order and asked that the diamonds should be sent here at once."

"What sort of a man?"

"Dark, about fifty, with a heavy mustache and wavy hair," said Chick, glibly. "Quite a big fellow, Hafferman states."

"H'm!" ejaculated Nick, with a significant nod. "Now, Mr. Garside, describe the man to whom you delivered the diamonds."

"Raymond?"

"If that is the name he gave you."

"He is a well-built, smoothly shaven fellow, of about thirty years, with a sallow complexion, slightly pock-marked—"

"Ah, I thought so!" Nick curtly interrupted. "That's quite sufficient, Mr. Garside."

"What do you mean, Carter?" quickly demanded Venner. "Do you already recognize these criminals?"

"I recognize their work."

"And the men?"

"I've them in mind from the outset."

"Impossible!"

"Not so, Mr. Venner," Nick now declared, with emphasis. "Without a shadow of doubt, sir, you have been victimized by the notorious Kilgore diamond gang, a trio of the shrewdest and most daring scoundrels that ever stood in leather."

"You amaze me."

"Do I?" inquired Nick, smiling softly. "Well, sir, if I were to tell you the history of these rascals, you would be more than amazed—you would be astounded. No crime is too desperate, no knavery too hazardous, no villainy too despicable, for them to attempt, and too often successfully execute. They have perpetrated their crimes over two continents, and are known to the police the world over."

"That is not very complimentary to the police," said Venner, dryly. "I marvel that such distinguished scoundrels are still at large."

"A fact which stamps them no ordinary criminals," replied Nick, pointedly. "Nor are they, sir."

"What do you know of them, Detective Carter?"

"David Kilgore, the chief of the gang, is one of the shrewdest and most daring of knaves, a man of splendid education, polished manners and broad experience. He possesses nerves of steel, the cunning of a fox, and would not shrink even from murder, if his designs required it. Yet he invariably covers his tracks so cleverly, or so quickly vanishes when hard pressed, that thus far he has successfully eluded the police. That's David Kilgore, sir."

"And what of his associates?" inquired Venner. "I think you spoke of a trio."

"His confederates are scamps of the same sort, and nearly his equal in craft and daring," replied Nick. "Perry Dalton is one —the smooth, pock-marked rascal whom you, Mr. Garside,

had the pleasure of meeting this morning. He is nicknamed Spotty Dalton, because of his slight disfigurement."

"And the other?"

"Is a man named Matthew Stall, more commonly called Matt Stall. He is a Western man, a graduate of a California university, and is an expert electrician. Oh, I know all about them," laughed Nick, "although this is the first time I have been up against them personally. I am rather glad to discover that they are here in New York."

"Why so, Detective Carter?" Venner carelessly inquired, with a subtle gleam in the depths of his dark eyes.

"Because I have long wanted to match my talents against those of Dave Kilgore and his rascally push," declared Nick, with grim austerity. "The last I knew of them they were in Amsterdam, Holland, where some of the finest work in diamond cutting is done, as you doubtless know."

"Indeed, yes."

"They probably had to jump that country for obvious reasons, and very likely the European continent," added Nick. "They have long avoided New York, and the fact that they are now here is significant of—well, well, we shall see! That's all, gentlemen!"

"But what do you intend doing about this case?" demanded Venner, as Nick abruptly rose to go.

"All that can be done, sir," the famous detective bluntly rejoined. "I accept the case, Mr. Venner, and will do my best with it. When I have anything to report, you shall hear from me."

"But—"

"There really is nothing more to be said, gentlemen, and the sooner I get to work the better," Nick gravely interposed.

"But will you advise me of any steps that you may take?" persisted Venner, briefly detaining him by the arm.

"Very probably," nodded Nick, though really he probably would do nothing of the kind. "And now good-day, gentlemen. If reporters call upon you, you may give them all of the facts, and state that Nick Carter is at work on the case. I want this Kilgore diamond gang to know at the outset that I am after them—and fully resolved to land them where they belong."

"Behind prison bars, eh?" inquired Venner, with an odd smile.

"Yes, sir! Behind prison bars!" declared Nick, forcibly. "Again, gentlemen, good-day. You will hear from me later."

Mr. Rufus Venner, with his partner at his elbow, stood in the office door and silently watched the two celebrated detectives as they strode quickly through the elegant store, from which they presently vanished into Fifth Avenue.

There was a smile of subtle cunning, combined with cruel and malicious determination, on Venner's dark face and he

muttered under his breath, as the store door closed upon Nick's imposing figure:

"Hear from you later, eh? Very good. Very good, indeed, Mr. Detective Carter! Hear from you again—that is precisely what I want! Early and often, Detective Carter; early and often, if you please! It is precisely for what the little robbery of this April morning was invented!"

"But was it necessary—was it really necessary, Rufus?" whispered Garside, who alone had overheard, and whose paler face and tremulous figure betrayed fears which his swarthy senior partner would have scorned to feel. "This Carter is a most artful and discerning man. I am so afraid you have barked up the wrong tree. Was it necessary, really necessary, Rufus?"

Venner turned upon him with a half-smothered snarl of contempt.

"Bah! You'd be afraid of your own shadow, Garside, if left alone with it," he sneered, between his white, even teeth. "Necessary—of course it was necessary! Otherwise, I should not have adopted the ruse. We are about to attempt a big game—an infernally big game! When it matures, when it is finally launched, the very first concern that finds itself bitten will rush to Nick Carter for aid."

"There is no doubt of that, Rufus."

"Surely no doubt of it! He is the greatest detective in the country—and the greatest will be none too clever, nor too

expensive, for those who find themselves duped by our unparalleled design."

"I should say so."

"What will be the result, Philip?—what will be the result?" added Venner, with a curious mingling of exultation and asperity. "If our victims appeal to Nick Carter for help—are we not also already in his good graces? Have we not insured his confidence in us by this little move of to-day? Will he not reveal himself and his suspicions to us, just as I have designed, and keep us posted about his every move, and so forewarned and forearmed? Of course he will—to be sure he will!"

"But he is such a crafty and daring—"

"Bah! Is he more crafty than Dave Kilgore?" demanded Venner, significantly. "Is he more daring than Spotty Dalton, or more determined than anyone of the Kilgore gang? Not by a long chalk, Philip, and I know of them of whom I speak. Ay, as much and more of them than does Detective Nick Carter."

"Perhaps you are right, Rufus," murmured Garside, nodding. "We certainly are about launching a tremendous, an utterly unparalleled, swindle. The like of it was never, never known. There should be millions in it. Yes, yes, Rufus, you are right. It was wise to preface our gigantic operations by getting well in touch with Nick Carter."

"To be sure, it was wise, Philip, or I should not have taken the trouble to do so," said Venner, with much less acrimony. "So be a man always, Philip, and never a flunky. You have played

your part admirably this morning. Let it be played as well, Philip, even to the finish—even to the last ditch!"

Philip Garside's color had returned, and he smiled confidently and nodded in approval.

Plainly enough, this hushed yet emphatic intercourse between these two indicated one fact—that Detective Nick Carter was up against a far deeper game than he then imagined.

CHAPTER IV.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK.

"Well, Nick, old man, what have you made of it?"

The question came from Chick Carter, in his familiar and cheerful fashion, several hours after the interview held by the two detectives with Rufus Venner and his partner in their Fifth Avenue store.

It was now about six o'clock in the evening, and Chick had just returned from having a confidential talk with one of the stage hands of the theater in which the then famous attraction, the mammoth European and American vaudeville troupe, of which Señora Cervera was a star attraction, had for several months been playing to crowded houses.

Chick found Nick seated at the table in his library, with a powerful magnifying glass in his hand, while the table was strewn with the papers he that morning had brought from the office of Venner & Co.

Nick looked up with a laugh, and knocked the ashes from his cigar.

"Well, there's no doubt about it, Chick," he replied. "We are finally up against them."

"The Kilgore diamond gang?"

"Precisely."

"I'm glad of it, Nick, as you remarked this morning."

"Well, I've not changed my mind since then. So am I."

"We shall now find out whether they are as crafty and desperate as they have been painted."

"I guess there is no doubt about it, Chick."

"Well, if we fail to throw them down, Nick, my money shall go on Kilgore from that moment," declared Chick, with a grin. "What have you dug out of that mess of papers, Nick? Have you arrived at any conclusions?"

"Rather!" smiled Nick, significantly. "Did you ever know me to study for five hours over anything of this kind without arriving at some conclusion?"

"Never!" laughed Chick. "And the best of it is, Nick, your conclusions nearly always prove to be correct. What's the verdict, old man?"

Nick glanced at the French clock on the mantel.

"Sit down and light up," he replied. "We have half an hour before getting down to work against this push. I will devote it to informing you of the case as it now appears."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Chick, drawing up a chair and lighting a cigar. "Let her go, Nick. I am all ears, as the donkey said to the deacon."

"To begin with," began Nick, more gravely, "this order sent to Hafferman, for the diamonds which he delivered at Venner's store, is merely a forgery. Neither Venner nor Garside wrote it, that's as plain as the nose on an elephant's face."

"Which is plain enough, surely," nodded Chick.

"Furthermore," continued Nick, "the forgery was not the work of any clerk employed in either store. I have compared the writing of each and every clerk with that of the forged order, and I will stake my reputation upon my conclusion. The forgery was committed by some outside party."

Nick was an expert chirographist. To have deceived him with a disguised handwriting would have been utterly impossible, and none knew it better than Chick, who now nodded approvingly.

"Some outside party, eh?"

"There is no doubt of it, Chick. And this conclusion at once suggests two very natural questions," Nick went on. "First, was one of the Kilgore gang in Hafferman's store when Venner went there yesterday, and did he overhear enough of what passed between them to enable him to plan the job done this morning?"

"Possibly."

"In opposition to that theory, however, is the fact that the forged order is written on one of Venner's printed letter sheets."

"By a little adroit work, Nick, one of the gang could have obtained a sheet of Venner's office paper."

"That is very true," admitted Nick. "But since this is a theory founded only upon conjecture, with no positive evidence to back it up, the stronger probability is rather to the contrary."

"Right, Nick, as far as that goes."

"I think so."

"And what is the second theory suggested?"

"That some clerk in one of the stores got wind of Venner's contemplated purchase, and revealed the fact to one of the Kilgore gang, by whom I am confident—bear in mind—that the crime was committed."

"That theory seems plausible," nodded Chick. "There is young Boyden, you know, at Hafferman's. He may have got wise to Venner's intentions. Garside remarked that he appeared quite anxious to leave the diamonds until Venner should return. That would have been very natural on his part, in case he was then co-operating with the party who finally secured them."

"The same objection again arises, however," argued Nick. "Boyden is not employed at Venner's, and therefore has not access to his letter paper. Furthermore, Venner's visit was

made only yesterday afternoon, less than twenty-four hours before the robbery occurred. It seems hardly probable that Boyden was already in league with the Kilgore gang; and, if he was not, it is even less probable that he so quickly got in touch with them."

"By Jove! that's so," cried Chick. "As a matter of fact, then, neither of these theories has a reliable leg to stand upon."

"That's exactly my conclusion," laughed Nick.

"And what then?"

"Concerning that side of the affair," replied Nick, "several irresistible convictions are therefore forced upon me. One of the Kilgore gang certainly knew of Venner's visit, and of the request he made Hafferman regarding the diamonds. Otherwise he could not have planned the job so neatly. Somebody must have informed him. Somebody must have provided him with one of Venner's letter sheets. If we eliminate the clerks, and the members of both firms, we are left very much in the dark."

"I should say so," rejoined Chick. "The affair becomes a dense mystery."

"It becomes a mystery that I don't quite fancy," declared Nick, with a significant nod. "In fact, Chick, I'm not at all favorably impressed with this robbery. To me it has a mighty fishy look."

"Why so, Nick?"

"It is not like this Kilgore gang, mark you, to have been dickering with a dirty little job of this kind, netting them only a few thousands at the best; yet a job in which they incurred as much danger of detection, Chick, as in one infinitely greater."

"By Jove! that's so. There's no getting away from that argument, Nick."

"Instead of trying to get away from it, Chick, I'm going to stay with it," continued Nick, with emphasis. "I am beginning to suspect that this paltry little robbery may in some way make a far deeper and darker game. At all events, Chick, we'll not wind ourselves in a search for those diamonds, at least not before we have sifted these side issues a little finer."

"Good enough!" cried Chick, heartily. "I agree with you on every point. Only your long head, Nick, old man, could have deduced such shrewd conclusions; and I believe, by Jove! that you have hit the nail on the head."

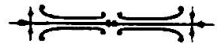
"If I have," rejoined Nick, grimly, "we'll drive the nail home a little later, and home to stay."

"That we will."

"There remains one other feature of the case," added Nick, "and, starting from that, we will begin work upon the affair this very night."

"You refer to that Spanish dancer, Cervera?"

"Precisely."



"And the fact that she requested Venner to call at her house this morning?"

"Exactly," nodded Nick. "She fixed the hour, mind you, probably knowing that Venner would comply with her request. Hence there exists a possibility that she designed to get him away from his store at just that time, in order that the robbery could be successfully executed."

"In which case, Nick, we necessarily must figure her in with the Kilgore gang, despite Venner's declaration of her honesty."

"Certainly we must, Chick, in case her note to Venner was written for the purpose mentioned," nodded Nick. "Of that, however, we have no positive evidence. It may have been purely accidental that her note was sent to-day, and mentioned the very hour when the theft was committed. Obviously, in that case, the thief outside was waiting for some opportunity when Venner should be away from his store. Cervera would then be out of the affair, as far as any criminal intent is concerned."

"Very probably."

"So there you are!" exclaimed Nick, with another glance at the clock. "Our half hour is up. You now have my measure of the case, and next we will get down to business. We will drop this fishy-looking robbery for the present, Chick, and first of all make a move to learn something about Señora Cervera, and her relations with Rufus Venner."

"A good scheme, Nick, and I'm with you."

"Have you been at the theater?"

"Yes, and fixed things with Busby."

"You can get in upon the stage to-night?"

"Sure thing, as I told you," laughed Chick. "Busby is the boss scene shifter there, and he consented to work me in as a stage hand."

"Ah! very good."

"I have got to make up for the part, however, and must soon be about it. I am due there at half-past seven."

"Get at it, then," said Nick, rising. "See what you can learn about Cervera, and what you make of her from observation. In case Venner is about there, keep your ears alert, so that you can overhear."

"You trust me for that, Nick," cried Chick, laughing.

"Meantime, Chick, I'll have a look at the show from the front," added Nick. "And after Cervera does her turn, in case Venner is there, and she departs with him, you then may leave the couple to me. I'll be waiting for them at the stage door."

"Right you are, Nick. So here goes!"

Shrewd deductions, indeed, those of Nick Carter.

Plainly enough, Garside was quite justified in his apprehension that Rufus Venner had barked up the wrong tree.

CHAPTER V.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

Nick Carter had a double object in the work laid out for that night. If Señora Cervera was indeed in league with the Kilgore gang, and in any way responsible for the diamond robbery, Nick was resolved to secure positive evidence of it.

While her letter to Venner appeared to implicate her, since it had taken him from his store just at the time of the robbery, it seemed hardly probable that this brilliant Spanish girl, whose extraordinary grace and whirlwind dances had made her the talk of the town, could be identified with a gang of criminals notorious the world over. Yet the bare possibility existed, and Nick never ignored even the shadow of a clew.

He further reasoned that, in case Cervera was in league with the suspected gang, one or more of them might visit the theater in which she was performing, and Nick decided to have a look at the audience that evening. He was sure he could identify Kilgore or any of his gang, even if disguised, as would be very probable.

Nick's second object was that of learning the exact relations between Señora Cervera and Rufus Venner, and a part of that

work he confided to Chick. With himself in the front of the house, and Chick on the stage, Nick believed that nothing worth seeing would escape them.

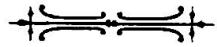
His own search early in the evening, however, proved futile. It was the last week but one of the mammoth vaudeville attraction, and the theater was densely crowded. Though Nick watched the lobbies and the smoking room, and also made a systematic study of the auditorium, he could discover no sign of the parties he was seeking.

About nine o'clock he returned to his chair in the orchestra, and settled himself to have a look at Cervera, whose act was one of the last on the program.

Just at that time Chick Carter, in the overalls and blouse of a scene shifter, made his first pertinent discovery—that Rufus Venner, clad in immaculate evening dress, and carrying an Inverness topcoat on his arm, had arrived upon the stage.

"He seems to be at home behind the scenes," soliloquized Chick, furtively watching him. "Evidently he has some kind of a pull with the manager, or he could not get admission to the stage. Probably through his friend, the Spanish señora."

Venner was then in one of the left wings, apparently indulging in small talk with a handsome girl of about twenty, who had just finished her turn upon the stage. She was rather simply clad, but was strikingly pretty and modest appearing; and upon consulting a program with which he had provided himself, Chick learned that her stage name was Violet Marduke; and that she was cast as a singer of ballads.



"Evidently employed to fill in," thought Chick, who had not been much impressed with her songs, though he decided that the girl herself was a beauty. "And by his admiring glances, Venner also thinks pretty well of her," Chick mentally added.

"Room here, mister," growled a voice at his elbow. "Make room for the reptiles."

Chick turned quickly about, and then involuntarily recoiled from the startling object that met his gaze.

In front of a scene then set in the second grooves of the Stage, the continuous performance was still in progress. Meantime, several of the stage hands were wheeling to the center of the stage, back of the scene, the properties of the next performer on the program—and grewsome properties they were.

The object beheld by Chick was a huge, cagelike den, mounted on low wheels, and having a broad front of plate glass. Inside of this den were several wicker baskets, some of which were open, while others were covered and locked.

In the open baskets, or writhing freely about the floor of the den, were fully fifty serpents of various sizes, many being only a foot or two long, while several were as many yards in length.

A more repulsive and blood-curdling sight Chick had never experienced, and the stage hand who had asked him to move laughed at his look of mingled horror and repugnance.

"Ever seen any like 'em after a jamboree?" he inquired, good-naturedly.

"Well, hardly," said Chick, subduing his aversion. "If I were to go on a drunk and see anything like them, I'd sign the pledge the next morning."

"A good scheme, too."

"I should say so."

"Some o' the crawling divils are as bad as they look," added the stage hand, while he helped to place the snake den squarely on the stage.

"What do you mean?" inquired Chick, still gingerly surveying them.

"Pizen!"

"Venomous?"

"You bet! Durn 'em, I wouldn't touch one of them for the wealth of Rockefeller."

"Do you mean that some of them still have their fangs and poison bags?"

"Sure! D'ye see that little copper-colored cuss down there in the corner, not more'n a foot long? If he got a crack at you, you'd not live ten seconds."

"Well, I will take deuced good care that he gets no nip at me," declared Chick, with a grin. "Why do they have such dangerous things around?"

"H'm! What would be the excitement, or the credit of snake charming, if the wriggling beasts were made harmless by pulling out their fangs?" demanded the stage hand. "It would be like a dog fight, with the dogs muzzled. These belong to that heathen Hindoo, the snake charmer. He shows next."

"Pandu Singe?" inquired Chick, glancing at the name on the program.

"Sure. He handles 'em like so many babies. There he is now, just coming from his dressing room. He looks a bit like a snake himself."

Chick turned and gazed curiously at the approaching foreigner.

Pandu Singe was a tall, swarthy man, with straight, black hair, an Indian cast of features, and a pair of intensely black and piercing eyes. Their glitter was indeed like that in the eyes of a snake, yet the Hindoo, approaching without a word to anybody, or a glance to either side, was not without a certain sort of savage dignity.

He wore a red turban around his head, while a loose, black robe, belted around his waist, reached nearly to his ankles. With a gesture he signed the several men away from his hideous den of reptiles, and Chick retired up the stage.

The detective had barely made his change, when he heard the low voice of Busby near by, the friend who had smuggled him upon the stage that evening.

"Hist! There she is, Chick!"

"Cervera?"

"Yes. Down yonder, just to the right of the electric switchboard. Slip in back of this wood wing, and you can have a good look at her."

"All right, Busby, old man," whispered Chick. "Don't you pay too much attention to me, or it may be noticed. I'll see all there is to be seen, old boy."

Busby winked understandingly, and Chick stepped back of the scenery mentioned, through a portion of which he could easily watch Cervera unobserved.

That she was a daughter of sunny Spain no man would have doubted. Her wavy hair was as dark as night, and her eyes were as radiant as the night stars. Her rich, olive complexion was much rouged, adding to the brilliancy of her splendid beauty.

She appeared to be about twenty-five, and was clad in her stage costume, which combined all the bright hues of the rainbow, and was enlivened by a myriad of dazzling jewels and diamonds.

The costume served to display to advantage her matchless figure, however, and Chick was fain to admit that he had never seen a much more striking beauty.

"She's a bird, all right, and no mistake," he said to himself, while intently regarding her handsome face and jewel-bedecked figure. "Yet she has a bad eye, despite her beauty, and a cruel mouth. She certainly would put up a wicked fight,

if once aroused. Yes, a deucedly bad eye! What in thunder is she staring at, to look like that!"

From her position near one of the lower wings, Sanetta Cervera was gazing steadfastly across the stage at something which Chick could not see.

The dark eyes of the Spanish dancer had taken on a threatening glare. Her curved brows had drooped and knit, until they formed a straight line below her forehead, and her red lips were drawn and firmly compressed.

Before Chick could discover any occasion for this mute display of feeling, the performance in front of the set scene concluded, and the act of the snake charmer was due to begin.

Then came a rapid change of scenery, during which Chick was again obliged to change his position, and for a time he lost sight of Cervera in the stir and confusion of the busy stage.

He did not succeed in locating her again until she began her performance, when a full stage was given her for the marvelously graceful and impassioned dances of which her act consisted, and which had fairly turned half the heads in the city.

In the white glare of the limelight, she certainly presented a wild and dazzling picture. Her beauty was indescribably accentuated. She appeared like a being ablaze with diamonds. Her every attitude was one of seductive grace, her every movement as swift and light as those of a startled leopard.

At its conclusion her act evoked thunders of applause, and then Chick saw her hastening toward her dressing room, flushed with excitement and panting for breath.

Suddenly she halted and her smile vanished.

Then Chick saw her turn abruptly toward one of the wing scenes, where she met Venner face to face.

The wealthy Fifth Avenue jeweler laughed and extended his hand to greet her, but she frowned and hesitated before accepting it; and Chick made a quick move and stole back of the scenery, near which the two briefly remained standing.

He arrived in time to overhear only a few words, however, of which he could make nothing bearing upon the diamond robbery, or relating to the Kilgore gang.

"Pshaw! You are entirely wrong, Sanetta," Venner was expostulating, with voice lowered. "Your eyes have deceived you."

The woman replied through her teeth, with a hiss like that of a snake.

"My eyes deceived me? Never! You lie! I know what I see!" she fiercely answered, with but a slight foreign accent.

"You are wrong, Cervera," protested Venner. "I—"

"I am not! I see—and I know!"

"But—"

"*Caramba!* I say you shall go with me!"

"Why, certainly, if you wish it. Am I not here for that?"

"You know that I wish it—and you shall go."

"Whenever you are ready, Sanetta," replied Venner. "Yet your infernal—"

"Silence! You shall wait here till I have changed my suit. Then we will go—we will go together. You shall wait here."

"Go and make the change, then," said Venner, bluntly. "I will be here when you return."

"H'm!" thought Chick, as he heard Cervera move quickly away. "Evidently there is something amiss between them, but what the dickens is it?"

Still watching, he soon saw Cervera return in her street attire, when Venner quickly gave her his arm, and they departed by the stairs leading to the stage door.

Chick immediately recalled Nick's instructions—that the couple should now be left to him.

VI.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Rufus Venner and Cervera, the latter enveloped in a voluminous black cloak, emerged from the stage door of the theater.

As they made their way through the paved area leading out to the side street, where a carriage was awaiting them, a sturdy, roughly clad fellow in a red wig and croppy beard suddenly slouched out of a gloomy corner near the stage stairway and followed them, with movements as stealthy and silent as those of a cat.

As the carriage containing Venner and the dancer rapidly whirled away, this rough fellow darted swiftly across the street, and approached a waiting cab, the door of which stood open.

"After them, Patsy!" he softly cried, as he sprang in and closed the door.

The driver of the cab was one of Nick Carter's youthful yet exceedingly clever assistants, and the rough fellow was Nick himself.

He had left the theater the moment Cervera concluded her performance, and since had completed a perfect disguise in the cab, which he had had in waiting, with all the properties for effecting the change mentioned.

That Patsy would constantly keep their quarry in view, and without being suspected, Nick had not a doubt. Nor was he mistaken. At the end of twenty minutes the clever young driver slowed down upon approaching an uptown corner, and signaled Nick to get out.

The detective alighted from the door on the side from which he had received the signal, yet the cab did not stop. Nick trotted along beside the vehicle for a rod or two, keeping it between him and the side street into which Patsy quickly signed that the hack had turned.

"Fourth house on the right," he softly cried. "I saw them pull up at it just as I reached the corner, so I kept right on up the avenue. They've not gone in yet."

"Good enough," replied Nick, approvingly. "Take home the traps I have left in the cab."

"Sure thing. You don't want any help to-night against this push, do you?"

"No, indeed. There'll be but little doing to-night, I imagine. Remember the house, however, in case I fail to show up."

"You may gamble on that, sir. I have it down pat."

They had now passed the upper corner of the side street, and Nick felt sure that he had not been seen leaving the cab. He darted quickly back of the vehicle and gained the sidewalk, then stole back and peered around the corner.

Cervera and her companion were just mounting the steps of an imposing stone residence, entirely separate from its neighbors, and their carriage was driving rapidly away.

Nick waited until the couple had entered the house, then he crossed to the gloom of a doorway on the opposite side and had a look at the dwelling.

From basement to roof there was no sign of a light. Even the hall appeared to be in darkness, and Nick waited and watched for several minutes, expecting to see at least one of the rooms lighted.

Not a glimmer or gleam, however, appeared from any quarter.

"H'm!" he presently muttered, a little perplexed. "Either they are remaining in darkness, or else they have all of those windows heavily curtained. If the latter is the case, I must discover for what reason.

"Possibly they are entirely alone in there, and have gone to some room at the rear of the house. Or maybe they have suspected an espionage, and are now watching from the gloom of one of those front windows. I'll fool them if that is so, and will also have a look at the rear of the house. There is something out of the ordinary here, that's certain."

Keeping well in the gloom of the block of dwellings near by, Nick retraced his steps to the corner, then crossed the street and presently approached a paved driveway leading to a small stable at the rear of the suspected house.

The high gate, composed of sharp iron pickets, was securely closed and locked; so Nick returned to an alley which he had just passed, and which ran back of a block of dwellings fronting on the avenue where he had left the cab.

Stealing into the alley, Nick quickly scaled the high, wooden fence, crossed two adjoining back yards, and thus reached a wall near the stable mentioned.

To mount the wall and drop back of the stable was equally feasible, and Nick then had the rear of Cervera's dwelling plainly in view.

Then his searching gaze was rewarded. One of the rear rooms was brightly lighted, with only the lace draperies at the two windows preventing observation from outside.

"Evidently a rear sitting room, or library," thought Nick, calculating the arrangement of the house. "I will at least learn who is in there."

He listened briefly for any sound in or about the stable, then stole quickly across the gloomy, paved yard and approached the house.

The windows of the lighted room were two feet or more above his head; but having reached a position just below one

of them, he sprang up and seized the stone coping outside, and drew himself up to peer into the room.

Then, just as his head rose into the glow of light from within, clearly revealing his location, Nick heard a sound the deadly nature of which he instantly recognized.

Ping!

It was the short, sharp, peculiar song of a flying bullet—once heard, always remembered.

Then came the dull thud when the leaden ball beat itself shapeless against the stone wall beside him.

The bullet had passed within an inch of Nick's ribs, and he knew at once that he was now a mark for hidden foes.

Yet there had been no revolver report to suggest their location, and Nick instantly surmised that the ball must have been discharged with an air gun.

He knew that it must have come from some quarter behind him, however. And he knew, too, how to bring his murderous assailants from their secret cover.

As quick as a flash, the instant the ball smote the wall beside him, Nick let go his hold upon the stone coping and dropped into the darkness below the window, falling prostrate upon his back.

As he lay there his hand touched something hot, and he drew it nearer to examine it.

It was the battered chunk of lead which had come within an inch of ending his life.

"They meant business, for sure," he said to himself, while waiting for his quick-witted ruse to operate. "I'm blessed if this affair is not taking on a new and lively interest. I reckon there'll be more doing to-night than I gave Patsy to believe.

"Ha, ha! The scoundrels are already breaking cover!"

His alert ears had detected a sound from the direction of the stable, and now he silently drew his revolver and held it gripped by his side.

Presently the stable door was cautiously opened. Then a momentary beam of light, evidently from a bull's-eye lantern, shot across the paved area, and lingered for an instant upon Nick's prostrate figure.

Nick remained as motionless as a corpse.

Then two men, both large and powerful fellows, and both heavily bearded, came quickly from the stable and hastened toward him.

"Done for with a single shot," remarked one, as they approached.

"Looks like it, Dave," was the reply. "When I piped his head in the light from the window, I felt sure I could drop him."

"Well done. 'Twas a good shot. Shove your hand inside his vest, and see if his heart is beating. Then we shall know for sure whether he's down and out. If not, we must—"

"Throw up your hands, instead, both of you!" Nick sternly interrupted, half rising with weapon leveled. "At the first move by either, I will shoot to kill!"

Nick had foreseen that his foxy strategy must be very quickly detected, and he had resolved to take the bull by the horns, and attempt to arrest both of his cowardly assailants.

That he was up against uncommon men, however, men of extraordinary nerve and reckless daring, appeared in what instantly followed, even under the very muzzle of the detective's revolver.

As quick as a flash, before Nick's threatening command was fairly out of his mouth, the man called Dave made a kick at the detective's uplifted arm, so swift and accurate and forceful that Nick felt the bones of his wrist fairly crack under the blow, and the fingers of his hand gripping the weapon turned numb and tingling as if from an electric shock.

"At him!" snarled the ruffian, even while he kicked. "At him, I say! Quick—the pear!"

It was plain that these men were not doing such desperate work together for the first time. Both fell upon Nick like wolves upon a stricken elk, yet they found the detective waiting for them.

Nick hurled one aside, unable to use his revolver, and grappled with the second, both falling heavily to the pavement.

Then number one was at him again, and got him by the throat, with a grip from which Nick thrice wrenched himself free, at the same time fiercely banging the head of the other upon the stones upon which the terrific combat was being waged.

An oath of vicious rage broke from the latter, and then he fiercely cried again:

"The pear! D—— you, be quick! The pear!—the pear!"

As if in response to this, Nick, who was panting under his violent efforts to overcome both powerful men, suddenly felt something thrust forcibly into his mouth.

Still manfully battling with his opponents, Nick tried to eject the object, opening his jaws wider in the effort.

The object, which was shaped like a solid pear, instantly expanded, and Nick could not close his jaws.

Again he tried, opening them still wider, and again the pear-shaped object expanded and held them rigid.

Then Nick guessed the truth.

While struggling with might and main to beat these ruffians, he had been made the victim of an infernal instrument but seldom seen in these days, and one of the most agonizing and diabolical devices of man's perverted ingenuity.

The object in Nick's mouth was a "choke pear!"

This vicious instrument of torture dates back to the time of Palioly, the notorious French robber and renegade, when it was very worthily called "the pear of anguish."

It consists of a solid gag, so to speak, yet it is so constructed, with interior springs, that, once thrust into a person's mouth, it expands as fast as the mouth is opened, and rigidly distends the victim's jaws.

The more widely the victim gapes to eject the "choke pear," or to cry out for aid, the larger the hideous object becomes, until torture, suffocation and death speedily ensue.

Had this infernal device been generally available to modern criminals, Nick would have been warned by the significant words he had heard, and would have guarded himself against it.

As it was, however, he had been caught; and in the mouth of any ordinary man the "choke pear" would have been irresistible.

But the muscles of Nick Carter's jaws were like fibers of steel, and the instant he realized his situation he opened his mouth no wider. Instead, while hands and arms were still engaged in the furious conflict with his assailants, he brought his jaws together as if with superhuman power, and with a force that crushed the infernal device between them, much as if it had been little more than an eggshell.

One of the ruffians heard the snapping crunch, and uttered a cry of amazement.

The cry was echoed by hurried footsteps in the house.

Then a rear door was suddenly thrown open by Rufus Venner, and a flood of light revealed the struggling men, still battling furiously on the pavement.

Nick now had both opponents down, and within another minute he would have had them at his mercy, a fact which Venner instantly perceived.

He sprang nearer, drew his revolver, and dealt the detective a single swinging blow upon the head.

Nick dropped like an ox struck down in the shambles.

The darkness of night was as nothing to the darkness that instantly fell upon him.

CHAPTER VII

A STRATEGIC MOVE.

Nick Carter had a head that was used to hard knocks, and it required more than one to put him down and out for any considerable period.

The great detective recovered consciousness within half an hour after the blow received from Rufus Venner, and he fell to taking the measure of his situation the moment the cobwebs began to clear from his brain.

He found himself bound hand and foot with ropes, and lying upon the floor of a dark room. That he was in the dwelling occupied by the Spanish dancer, Nick had not a doubt.

As his mind became clearer and his eyes accustomed to the darkness, Nick discovered a narrow thread of light some yards away and close to the floor, and presently the sound of lowered voices faintly reached his ears.

"A light in the next room," he said to himself. "Probably the whole gang is out there, sizing up my case, and deciding what to do with me. If they are there, I must get a better look at those two ruffians. I owe them something for their work of to-night, and I always mean to pay such debts.

"One of them was called Dave, and it may have been Dave Kilgore himself. In which case, by Jove! I was right in thinking that this diamond robbery only masks some deeper and bigger game.

"I wonder if they suspect my identity. If not, what sort of a game have they been playing here to-night?"

Nick very quickly measured the various possibilities of the unusual situation.

If the man whose name he had heard was indeed David Kilgore, then Rufus Venner, as well as Cervera, might be in league with the diamond gang, and the pretended robbery only a move made with some secret design.

On the other hand, Venner might be entirely ignorant of Kilgore's identity, and without any serious suspicions of Cervera, being himself a blind victim of these notorious criminals.

"If the latter is the case," reasoned Nick, "the gang may stand in fear of me, and perhaps are afraid that I shall foil some scheme they have in operation, or are about to undertake. Then they to-night may have aimed only to discover the extent and nature of my suspicions.

"If that is the case, plainly it will become me to be a little foxy. I will see if I can contrive to overhear anything from out yonder."

Bent upon wriggling nearer the closed door revealed by the thread of light near the floor, Nick quietly turned upon his side and cautiously worked his way over the carpet.

He had covered scarce a yard, however, when the sharp, metallic ring of Cervera's voice fell plainly on his ears.

"Look again, one of you," she curtly commanded. "See if that vagabond has come to himself."

"That's your humble servant!" thought Nick.

He quickly rolled back to his former position on the floor, and prepared to play the fox.

In a moment the door was thrown open, admitting a flood of light, and a man strode into the room and dropped to his knee beside the motionless detective.

"I say!" he harshly growled, shaking Nick roughly by the shoulder. "Brace up, you dog! Brace up, d'ye hear?"

Nick groaned deeply, then slowly opened his eyes.

"Oh, my head—my poor head!" he muttered, like one dazed and in pain.

"Your poor head, eh?" sneered the other. "You're dead lucky to have a head left you. Pull yourself together, do you hear?"

"Let me be! Where am I?"

"You'll soon find out where you are. Sit up here!"

"What do you say?" cried Venner, from the next room. "Has he come to?"

The man at Nick's side turned his head to reply, and Nick then obtained a clear view of his profile.

"Humph!" he mentally ejaculated. "Matthew Stall in disguise! One of the diamond gang, sure enough, and I now know I am on the right track."

"Yes, he's finally coming to time," cried Stall, in reply to Venner. "He will be all right in a minute."

"Bring him out here," commanded Cervera, sharply. "Get the wretch up, and bring him out here."

This was precisely what Nick wanted.

Stall immediately bent lower, and released the detective's ankles.

"Get up, you varlet!" he then growled. "Get up, I say!"

Still groaning, and incoherently muttering, Nick permitted himself to be raised to his feet, and Stall then supported him and urged him out through the open doorway and into the adjoining room.

In his red wig and croppy head, together with his rough attire and dazed aspect, Nick certainly presented a wretched

appearance. He blinked confusedly, glanced down at his bound wrists, yet at the same time took in every feature of the brightly lighted room.

It plainly was the library of the house, and both Rufus Venner and Cervera were seated near a handsome center table. Upon it lay most of the woman's jewels and diamonds, evidently lately removed, and presenting in the rays of light from the chandelier above a dazzling temptation to such a fellow as Nick then appeared to be.

In an easy-chair, near the wall, sat the man called Dave, at the time Nick was thought to be dead outside. Now, in the bright light of the room, Nick instantly recognized him to be David Kilgore, despite a heavy disguise which the criminal obviously believed to be impenetrable.

Nick gave no sign of the recognition, however, being content to await developments, and to shape his own course accordingly.

From that moment, however, the name of neither criminal was once mentioned; and Nick was compelled to infer that Venner might indeed be entirely ignorant of their true identity and knavish character.

The eyes of all were upon the detective, as he stood swaying slightly on the floor; and Cervera sharply demanded, with a threatening frown:

"Well, you vile miscreant, what can you say for yourself?"

"Me?" queried Nick, pretending to pull himself together. "Nothing at all."

"I guess that's right."

"What should I say? Why have you got me here, and tied up in this fashion?"

"You'll soon find out," cried Cervera, with vicious asperity. "What were you doing out back of my house?"

"Nothing much," Nick evasively growled, waiting to learn which way the cat was about to jump.

"Nothing much!" sneered Cervera. "You'll find that will not go down with us."

"I was looking for a chance to sleep in your stable," muttered Nick.

"You lie, you dog!" cried Kilgore, fiercely. "You were at the back window."

"Was I?"

"And your game was to rob me of my jewels," Cervera angrily added, with her eyes emitting a gleam as fiery as the blazing gems at which she pointed. "That was your game, you renegade!"

"Do you think so?"

"I know so!"

Nick hoped she did.

"And all I regret is," added the vixenish Spaniard, "that the bullet of my watchman did not end your villainous life."

"We can end it now, señora, if you say the word," put in Matthew Stall, with grim readiness.

Nick never accepted such scenes as this at their face value, for he had witnessed many a similar game of bluff. This one might be all right and on the level, he reasoned, yet there still existed the possibility that he was recognized, and that these remarks implying the contrary were only a part of some well-laid plan.

"If you think I'm a thief, why don't you hand me over to the police?" he shrewdly demanded.

The ruse worked. For a moment Cervera was caught with no ready reply, and Nick promptly decided that he was known, hence could not well be given to the police.

Yet these parties so obviously aimed to hide the fact that he was known to be Nick Carter, that Nick quickly resolved to let them have all the rope they wanted, and to meet them with a counter-move—that of boldly declaring his own identity, and so disarming them of any misgiving that he had recognized Kilgore and Matthew Stall, or even had any suspicions of Señora Cervera.

It was a very clever counter, and Nick went at it cleverly.

"Why don't you give me to the police, if you think I'm a thief?" he repeated, when Cervera made no reply.

"The police?—bah!" she now cried, with a sneer. "For what? That you may square yourself in some way, or make your escape, and then come back here to attempt the job again?"

"H'm!" thought Nick. "They don't want to let me go before learning what I suspect. I won't do a thing but fool them in that."

"Police be hanged!" Cervera quickly added. "In my country we have a surer way of removing such villains as you."

"What way?" queried Nick, coolly.

"*Caramba!* The garrote!"

"Choke 'em off, eh?"

"Or the poniard!"

"A stab between the ribs, I take it."

"Yes! It is what you deserve."

"But you will not try it on me," declared Nick, confidently.

"Don't you be too sure of it."

"Oh, I'm sure enough of it."

"The law would never reach us—don't think that," cried Cervera, with a passionate sneer. "*Caramba!* we'd plant your

miserable bones where they'd never be found. Don't think, you wretch, that we fear to do it."

"Yet I don't fear that you will."

"You don't?"

"Not I, Señora Cervera."

"How dare you utter my name with your foul mouth?" screamed the dancer, with a vicious display of scornful resentment. "Not kill you? I've a mind to order it done at once, you wretch! I hate such reptiles as you!"

Nick laughed.

"If you were to order it done, señora, and the knife were at my throat," said he, "your order would certainly be countermanded."

"What! By whom?" cried Cervera, with her passionate, dark eyes fiercely blazing. "I'll have you know that I rule here—and not here alone!"

"Yet your command would be revoked, señora."

"For what reason, villain?"

"It would be revoked at the request of our mutual friend, Mr. Rufus Venner, to whom I presently shall explain my conduct, and also implore your own pardon, señora, for having made you the mark of my very unworthy suspicions," cried Nick, with a sudden dramatic display of dignity and confidence.

It brought Venner sharply to his feet.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "What do you mean, sir?"

"Ay, what do you mean?" roared Kilgore, bracing straight up in his chair and reaching for his gun—a move Nick pretended he did not see.

"I only mean, gentlemen, that I am no burglar," cried Nick, in his natural voice, at the same time raising his bound hands to remove his disguise. "Allow me, Mr. Venner, to present myself in proper person."

"The devil and all his followers!" yelled Venner. "You're—you're Nick Carter!"

"None other," bowed Nick, smiling and tossing his disguise upon the table. "Plainly, Venner, you are greatly surprised at seeing me—and I do not wonder at it."

Yet for all that Nick did wonder a little, since he could not yet determine just how much of this scene was on the level.

The faces of Kilgore and Matthew Stall, however, betrayed more secret exultation than surprise. Plainly enough both were now convinced that Nick did not recognize them, nor even suspect that he himself had been recognized—and these were precisely the two convictions Nick had aimed to convey by his masterly move in thus disclosing himself.

"Yes, Señora Cervera," he hastened to add, before any of the startled group could speak, "I owe you a profound apology. I did you the injustice to suspect you, not only of being a thief,

but also of being identified with the notorious Kilgore gang, three of the cleverest and most dangerous swindlers in the world."

"Perdition!" gasped Cervera. "You astound me."

"I was led to suspect you, señora, because your letter to Venner took him from his store just at the time of the robbery," Nick quickly went on to explain, thus putting his own strategy on a solid basis. "I shadowed you from the theater to-night, intending to watch you and your house, a design which has nearly cost me my life at the hands of your faithful watchman.

"I am glad to add, señora, that I now have completely changed my views, and I trust that you will bear in mind that you were a stranger to me, and so pardon my unworthy misgivings. It is impossible that you, Señora Cervera, could be guilty of any evil, or know aught of so accomplished a knave as David Kilgore, or any of his clever gang."

A shrewder move could scarce have been conceived. That Nick would thus have declared himself in the very presence of Kilgore, if known to him, seemed utterly absurd; and the eyes of both Kilgore and Matt Stall were aglow with a vicious amusement and satisfaction much too genuine to be entirely concealed.

"Well, Mr. Carter," cried Venner, now hastening to release the defective's hands, "you certainly have had a close call, and are lucky to come out of it with a whole skin. These two men are

employed by señora to guard her house at night, and they naturally mistook you for a burglar."

Despite his keen discernment, Nick could not determine whether this man was lying, or was really as blind as his words implied. Content to await further discoveries, however, Nick laughed quickly, and replied:

"Well, well, Mr. Venner; I am quite accustomed to close calls and hard knocks, and I assure you that I bear the señora's watchmen no ill will for having done their duty as they saw it. Señora Cervera is to be congratulated upon having secured the services of two such faithful fellows."

Kilgore had all he could do to keep from laughing aloud, so blinded was he by Nick's artful duplicity.

"And when I inform you, señora," cried Venner, "that Detective Carter is in my employ, and is really a royal good friend, I am sure that you will pardon him for having been so misled by your letter of this morning."

Señora Cervera was blushing now, yet to Nick it appeared a little forced, and there was in her evil, black eyes a gleam he did not like. Yet she at once arose and came to shake the detective by the hand.

"Oh, if my dear friend, Mr. Venner, says it is all right, I am sure it must be so," she cried, smiling up at Nick. "But I am afraid, Detective Carter, that you will now think me dreadfully severe, and my two watchmen more brutal than bulldogs."

Nick laughed deeply, and glanced at the display of diamonds on the table.

"When one has such valuable toys as those in her house, señora, bold men and vigilant bulldogs are both essential," said he, heartily.

"That's true, sir; indeed, it is."

"And with your permission, señora, I will shake hands with your two watchmen also, to show them I bear no resentment. After which I will take myself home, to nurse my little tokens of their vigilance and prowess."

This brought a laugh from all, and Nick, ever shrewd and crafty, now shook hands with the two criminals he fully intended to finally land behind prison bars. Then he bowed himself out of the room, and was accompanied by Rufus Venner to the front door of the house, where he bade him a genial good-night and departed.

When Venner returned to the room, he found Dave Kilgore seated on the edge of the table, with his false beard in his hand, and a look of intense distrust on his evil, forceful face.

"Crafty—infernally crafty!" he cried, as Venner entered. "I tell you, Rufe, that man must be watched. He is a man to be feared—constantly feared! I'm cursed if I can tell whether he gave us that on the level or not."

"Pshaw!" sneered Venner, contemptuously. "Of course it was on the level."

"I'm not so sure of it—not so sure of it!" reiterated Kilgore, with clouded brow. "I tell you, Venner, that he must be watched, and we must be guarded. We have too much at stake to suffer Nick Carter to queer our game."

"There is one sure way of preventing it," cried Cervera, with passionate vehemence.

"Kill him?"

"Yes! Take his life!" hissed the dancer, through her gleaming white teeth. "You were fools to have missed it to-night. Even the law would have acquitted you."

"There are nights to come!" Kilgore grimly retorted.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOUND DEAD.

"What's the trouble yonder, Nick?"

"Where?"

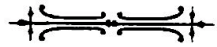
"In the park."

"Humph! Something wrong, evidently. Come on, Chick, and we'll see."

It was nearly sunset one Monday afternoon, and almost two weeks subsequent to the incidents last depicted.

That at least one of Dave Kilgore's suggestions had been adopted, and he and his gang had become rigorously guarded, appears in that the Carters had utterly failed to accomplish anything against them in the interval mentioned. Despite constant vigilance and incessant work on the case, neither Nick nor Chick had been able to secure an additional clew.

Kilgore and Matt Stall had vanished as if the earth had swallowed them.



The mammoth vaudeville troupe had completed its engagement, and was now disbanded for the season.

Señora Cervera still retained her uptown house, and frequently received Venner as a visitor; but never a sign of the diamond gang, or of any stranger, could the detectives discover, in or about her place.

Rufus Venner was attending to his business as usual, and appeared all aboveboard. Now and then he called upon Nick about the stolen diamonds, expressing a hope that they would be recovered; but in no way did he lay himself open to further suspicions than Nick had at first conceived.

Yet Nick was too shrewd to press him with questions, and so perhaps betray his own hand. As a matter of fact, the famous detective was in quite a quandary over the case, because of his conviction that some big game was secretly afoot, and his utter inability to strike any tangible clew to it.

Such a state of affairs was very unusual, and Nick chafed under it. It indicated that he was up against men as good as himself, and his vain work of the past ten days served only to aggravate him, and embitter his grim and inflexible determination to unearth the whole business.

This Monday afternoon, as Nick and Chick were passing Central Park, the attention of the latter was drawn toward a group of men in one of the park walks, somewhat removed from the street. A policeman was among them, and they appeared to be gazing at something upon the ground.

"It looks like the figure of a woman," said Nick, as he and Chick entered the park. "Officer Fogarty is there, and—yes, by Jove! it is the form of a woman."

The two detectives quickly reached the scene, and the park officer at once recognized Nick, respectfully touching his helmet.

"What's amiss here, Fogarty?" inquired Nick.

Fogarty pointed to the motionless form upon the ground.

"Dead!" said he, tersely. "We've just found her."

"Keep those people further away, Fogarty," said Nick, with a toss of his head toward half a score of men gathered near by. "I will see what I make of the case."

The figure was that of a girl, rather than a woman, apparently about eighteen years of age. She was lying partly upon her side upon the greensward, and evidently had fallen from one of the park seats upon which she had been resting, and upon which her straw shade hat was still lying. She was neatly clad in a suit of dark blue, and her girlish face indicated some culture and refinement.

Near her, upon the grass, lay a piece of brown wrapping paper, and a yard of two of string, evidently removed from a small, square box, which she had dropped and partly fallen upon when stricken with sudden death.

A mere glance gave Nick these superficial features, and he quickly knelt beside the girl, and felt her hand and wrist.

"Dead as a doornail," he murmured to Chick, who also had approached. "I find her hand still warm, however. She can have been dead only a few minutes."

"Heart failure, perhaps," suggested Chick.

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"She doesn't look it. Her form is plump, her cheeks full, and she appears to have been in perfect health."

"Yet she is dead."

"No doubt of it."

"A pretty girl, too."

"Very. See if there is any writing on that brown paper."

"No, Nick; not a line."

"Here, here, let me see it! What's this? It is punctured with tiny holes, evidently made with a pin."

"So it is, by Jove!"

"Perhaps she made them with her hat pin, while sitting there on the seat. See, Chick, there is the pin still in the hat."

"I see it, Nick. What now?"

Still kneeling beside the girl, Nick was holding the sheet of paper between himself and the sky.

"No, the punctures are not uniform," said he. "I thought that they possibly had been made with some design, and perhaps formed some word or sentence that would give us a clew to the mystery."

"None such, eh?"

"Not a sign of it. Evidently she jabbed the pin through the paper only in idleness."

"She is lying on a box of some kind, from which she probably had taken this wrapping paper."

"So I see," nodded Nick. "Lend me a hand, Chick, and we'll have a look at the box."

With gentle hands the two detectives moved the girl's lifeless form, and Nick then took up the box mentioned.

It was about four inches square, and was made of silver, with an open work design of vines and leaves, which displayed a blue silk lining through the metal apertures. Plainly enough it was a lady's jewel casket, and one of considerable value; but it was entirely empty, and it bore no name or inscription.

For several moments Nick Carter examined it very intently, with his brows gradually knitting closer and closer; and all the while Officer Fogarty, and the group of men in the gravel walk a few yards distant, mutely gazed and wondered.

Chick Carter, however, who could read Nick's every change of expression, saw at once that the great detective not only was making some startling discoveries, but also was arriving

at deductions far too subtle and significant to have been reached by any less keen and practiced observer.

"What do you make of it, Nick?" whispered Chick, dropping to his knee beside his companion.

Nick also lowered his voice, and for several minutes the two conversed in rapid whispers.

"It is a jewel case, Chick; and quite a valuable one."

"So I see."

"I don't think it belonged to this girl. She looks as if she were the maid, or possibly the companion, of some woman of wealth or distinction. Her attire also indicates that. Hence so valuable a toy can hardly have belonged to the girl, but more likely was the property of her mistress."

"No name on it?"

"Not even an initial. Not a mark of any kind."

"It is empty."

"Yes."

"Can the girl have been robbed of its contents, here and in broad daylight?"

"Worse, Chick!" whispered Nick, between his teeth. "Worse even than that."

"Good heavens, Nick! What do you mean?"

"Chick, this girl was foully murdered!"

"Murdered!" echoed Chick, with an involuntary gasp. "Can it be possible?"

"It certainly appears so to me."

"But the means?"

"That is the mystery."

"There are no signs of violence."

"Wait a bit. Notice her right wrist, just back of the thumb and near the pulse. Notice that tiny red spot, barely observable. It might have been made with the point of a pin. Do you see, it?"

"Yes, now that you call my attention to it."

"It means something. I am convinced of that."

"Others are not likely to discover it."

"I hope they may not, Chick," Nick hurriedly rejoined. "I am flooded with ideas and suspicions, which I wish to consider and put in order before too much of this mystery leaks out. I'll explain later."

"Perhaps her hat pin is poisoned," suggested Chick.

"I don't think that."

"Or possibly—"

"Wait a moment. Look at this box."

"Well?"

"That wrapper was punctured while still on the box," explained Nick. "Notice that the pin went through the spaces in this metal design, and then through the silk lining inside."

"Plainly enough, Nick."

"Notice this particular puncture in the interior of the lining."

"By Jove! there's a faint tinge of red around it."

"Left when the pin was withdrawn," whispered Nick, significantly. "Chick, it's a tinge of blood!"

"I believe you're right, Nick."

"I am convinced of it. Also that there's a mystery here which cannot be solved in a moment," said Nick, impressively. "I wish to conceal these discoveries until after I have considered them more fully, and also identified this girl. See if you can find her purse, or anything that will reveal her name."

While Chick was thus engaged, Nick arose and glanced sharply around in search of any evidence indicating that such a crime could have been committed unobserved in so public a place.

The seat which the girl had occupied stood on the greensward, about eight feet from the gravel walk. By several clusters of shrubbery some feet away at either side, the seat was somewhat obscured from the view of persons

approaching along the walk from either direction. Several trees cast shadows nearly over the spot, which was one very likely to have been selected by a couple desirous of being somewhat alone while resting from an afternoon stroll.

Nick quickly noted these several features, then glanced at Chick and asked:

"Do you find anything?"

"Nothing by which to identify her."

"Her purse?"

"It contains only a few pieces of silver. No cards, nor so much as a scrap of paper. Other than her purse, there is only a latchkey in her pocket, and a perfectly plain handkerchief. Her identification must come later."

"I guess we have missed nothing here," nodded Nick. "I'll have just a word with Fogarty, and then we'll go along."

"What do you make of it, Detective Carter?" inquired the officer, as Nick approached.

"I am not prepared to say," replied Nick, ignoring the startled glances of the several men who heard his name and now beheld the great detective for the first time.

"The girl is dead, sir, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes; there is no doubt of that," bowed Nick. "It may be a case of heart failure. You had better take the proper steps for the removal of the body. This box and wrapping paper,

however, I am going to take with me, and will be responsible for them."

"All right, sir."

"By the way, Fogarty, how long ago did you discover the body?"

"Scarce a minute before you came, sir."

"Were you the first to see it?"

"I was, sir."

"Had you seen the girl about here before during the afternoon?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see anybody leaving here just before you arrived and discovered the body?"

"I did not, sir."

"That's all, Fogarty. I'll get any other particulars later."

Thereupon, as Nick was about to turn away, a young man in the crowd came suddenly forth, and exclaimed:

"One moment, Detective Carter, if you please! I saw that girl, about half an hour ago, walking this way with a gentleman."

Nick turned abruptly to the speaker.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Tom Jenkins, sir."

"And your address?"

"I live at the Hotel North, and am employed by Hentz Brothers, in Broad Street."

"You say that you saw the girl walking this way with a gentleman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did they appear to be on good terms?"

"Excellent, sir. They were talking and laughing, and seemed to be enjoying themselves."

"Do you know the girl's name, or where she lives?"

"I do not, sir; nor anything about her."

"Do you know anything about her companion, the gentleman you saw with her?"

For the bare fraction of a second Jenkins hesitated, as one might do who was loath to bring trouble upon another. Then he replied, in faltering tones:

"Well, yes, sir, I know the name of the man who was with her."

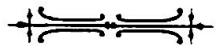
"State it, please."

"His name, sir, is Harry Boyden."

Nick felt his blood start slightly, yet his countenance did not change by so much as a shadow.

He glanced at Chick, however, and the same thought was in the mind of each.

"Harry Boyden! The clerk employed by Thomas Hafferman, the dealer in diamonds!"



CHAPTER IX.

NICK STRIKES A STARTLING CLEW.

The mind of Nick Carter was, as he had remarked to Chick, stirred with a flood of questions not easily or quickly answered.

Who was this girl found dead in Central Park?

Had she, indeed, been foully murdered? If so, by what mysterious means? What had been the object? Who the perpetrator of the crime?

Or, on the other hand, was the evidence itself misleading, and had the unfortunate girl selected that sequestered seat in the park, and there deliberately committed suicide? Even then, by what means had the deed been accomplished? What had been the occasion?

What, moreover, had become of her companion at just that time? Why had he deserted her? What signified the pin-punctured wrapping paper, and the empty jewel casket, in the dead girl's possession?

Had the casket contained jewels of great value? Had the girl been robbed of them, and then foully murdered in some mysterious way?

Was Harry Boyden, the clerk employed by Hafferman, the last to leave the girl that fateful afternoon? Was he responsible for her death? Was robbery the incentive to the crime?

Or, on the other hand, had Boyden left the girl alive and well, and was the crime the work of another?

Or, finally, was there some strange and startling connection between this park murder and the robbery committed at Venner's store? Was there, between the two crimes, some extraordinary bond yet to be discovered—some tie uniting the two misdeeds as if with links of steel?

These were some of the conflicting questions that occurred to Nick Carter that afternoon, and in order to consider them before taking any decided action in the matter, Nick had kept to himself his startling discoveries, and left Officer Fogarty to take the customary steps in the affair.

At seven o'clock that evening, while Nick and Chick were seated at dinner, and still engaged in discussing the conflicting circumstances, a message was received from police headquarters, informing Nick that the girl had been identified, and that Harry Boyden had been found and arrested.

"Very good," observed Nick. "We shall now get something to work upon. I will go and question Boyden as soon as I finish my dinner."

"By all means," nodded Chick.

"Do you know," said Nick, "I am seriously impressed that there is some strange connection between this girl's death and that robbery at Venner's store. I believe that we have struck the very clew, or are about to strike it, that we so long have been vainly seeking."

"To the Kilgore gang?"

"Exactly."

"Egad, I hope so," laughed Chick, with a grimace. "I am beastly tired of nosing about on a scentless trail."

Nick joined in the laugh of his invariably cheerful associate.

"Odds blood, Nick, as they say in the play," added Chick. "I'd welcome any sort of stir and danger, in preference to this chasing a will-o'-the-wisp."

"There'll be enough doing, Chick, take my word for it, as soon as we once more get on the track of Kilgore and his push."

"Let it come, and God speed it," grinned Chick. "What's your idea, Nick?"

"This empty jewel casket, the possibility that it contained diamonds, of which the girl was robbed and then murdered,

and the fact that Harry Boyden is the clerk who brought the stolen diamonds to Venner's store—certainly the circumstances seem to point to some strange relation between the two crimes."

While Nick was thus expressing his views, a rapidly driven carriage approached the residence of the famous detective, and a servant presently entered the dining room and informed Nick that a lady wished to see him.

Nick glanced at her card.

"Violet Page," he muttered. "I know no lady named Violet Page. Is she young or old?"

"Young, sir."

"Did you admit her?"

"She is in the library, sir."

"Very well. I will see her presently. Request her to wait a few moments."

Nick delayed only to finish his dinner, then repaired to the library. As he entered the attractively furnished room his visitor quickly arose from one of the easy-chairs and hastened to approach him.

Nick beheld a young lady of exquisite beauty and modest bearing, and though her sweet face, then very pale and distressed, struck him as one he had previously seen, he at first could not place her.

"Are you Mr. Carter—Detective Carter?" she hurriedly, inquired, in tremulous accents of appeal.

Nick had a warm place in his heart for one so timid and distressed as this girl appeared, and he bowed very kindly.

"Yes, Miss Page," said he. "What can I do for you? You appear to be in trouble."

"I am in trouble—terrible trouble, sir," cried the girl, with a half-choked sob. "Oh, Mr. Carter, I come to you in despair, a girl without friends or advisers, and who knows not whither to turn. I have been told that you have a kind heart, and that you are the one man able to solve the dreadful mystery which —"

Nick checked her pathetic flood of words with a kindly gesture.

"Calm yourself, Miss Page," said he, in a sort of paternal way. "Resume your chair, please. Though I am somewhat pressed for time just now I will give you at least a few moments."

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

"Be calm, however, in order that we may accomplish all the more."

"I will, sir."

"To what mystery do you refer? What is the occasion of your terrible distress?"

Violet Page subdued her agitation and hastened to reply.

"My maid and companion, a girl named Mary Barton," said she, "was found dead in Central Park late this afternoon. Nor is that all, Detective Carter. A very dear friend of mine, named Harry Boyden, has been arrested, under suspicion of having killed her. Oh, sir, that could not be possible!"

Nick felt an immediate increase of interest.

He decided that Miss Violet Page was the very person he wanted to interview, and while he did not then exhibit any knowledge of the case, he proceeded to question her with his own ends in view, at the same time ringing a signal for Chick to join him, which the latter presently did.

"Where do you live, Miss Page?" inquired Nick.

"I board in Forty-second Street, sir. I have no living relatives, and for about two years have employed a maid, or, I might better call her, a companion."

"The girl mentioned?"

"Yes, sir. Her parents also are dead. The fact that we both are orphans created a bond of sympathy between us."

"Are you a person of much means, Miss Page?"

"Oh, no, sir. I earn my living on the stage. I was a member of the big vaudeville troupe, which lately disbanded for the season. My stage name is Violet Marduke."

"Ah! now I remember," remarked Nick. "I thought I had seen you before. I happened to hear you sing one evening about two weeks ago."

"I recognized her when I entered," observed Chick, who had taken a chair near by.

Nick came back to business.

"Why are you so confident, Miss Page, that Boyden cannot have killed Mary Barton?" he demanded.

"Because, sir, Harry Boyden is a gentle, brave and honest man, and utterly incapable of committing such a crime," cried Violet, with much feeling. "Besides, sir, he can have had no possible reason for wishing her dead."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely!"

"What are your relations with Boyden?"

"We are lovers, sir," admitted Violet, with a tinge of red dispelling the paleness of her pretty cheeks. "We expect to be married the coming summer."

"Ah! I see," murmured Nick, thoughtfully. "How long have you been acquainted with Boyden?"

"For ten years, sir."

"Then you have been able to form quite a reliable opinion of his character."

"Indeed, sir, I have!" cried Violet, warmly. "Detective Carter, I know that Harry Boyden is far above any dishonorable action. I would trust him with my life."

Of the honesty of the girl herself Nick had not a doubt. It showed in her eyes, sounded in her voice, and was pictured in her ever changing expression. Nick was inclined to feel that her opinion of Boyden was worthy of very serious consideration, despite that circumstances seemed to implicate the young man in no less than two crimes.

"Is the fact that you are engaged to Boyden generally known, Miss Page?" Nick next asked.

"It is not, sir. We have said nothing about it."

"Ah, that opens the way for conjectures," cried Nick. "Is there any person who knows of the engagement, or who suspects it, that would jealously aim to injure Boyden by implicating him in a crime?"

"Oh, I cannot think so, sir!" said Violet, with a look of horror. "I certainly know of no such person."

"Have you been accepting the attentions of any other young man?"

"No, sir," smiled Violet. "That is not my style."

"I am glad to hear you say so, yet I really might have known it," laughed Nick.

"Thank you, Detective Carter," bowed the girl, blushing warmly. Then she hastened to add: "Still, I am not a prude, sir—don't think I mean that. In my profession one is obliged to be on friendly terms with a great many persons, both men and women. At the theater, for instance, I meet many men and form many acquaintances, both agreeable and the reverse."

"And sometimes have the attentions of men fairly forced upon you, I imagine?" said Nick, inquiringly, with a brighter gleam lighting his earnest eyes.

"Yes, sir; sometimes," Violet demurely admitted.

Nick drew forward in his chair, and Chick saw that he had caught up the thread at that moment suggested to himself.

"Miss Page," said Nick, more impressively, "I now want you to answer me without the slightest reserve."

"I will, sir," bowed Violet, with a startled look.

"Has any man of the late vaudeville company, or one connected with the theater, endeavored to force his love upon you?"

"No, sir; not one."

"Or any visitor admitted to the stage?"

"Well—yes, sir," faltered Violet, quite timidly. "Since you press me thus gravely, I must admit that I have been obliged to repel the affection of a certain man. Yet, please don't infer, sir, that he has ever been ungentlemanly. He even has done

me the honor, if one can so term an undesired proposal, to protest that he wished to make me his wife."

"What is that man's name?" demanded Nick, quite bluntly.

Yet both Nick and Chick already anticipated it.

"Must I tell you his name, sir?" faltered Violet.

"You may do so confidentially, Miss Page."

"His name, sir, is Rufus Venner."

"One more question, Miss Page," cried Nick, quickly, "Was there any member of the vaudeville company who knew of Venner's proposal?"

"I don't think so, sir. At least I know of none."

Nick glanced at Chick and dryly remarked:

"All under the surface, Chick."

"Not a doubt of it, Nick."

Violet looked surprised and alarmed at this, and hastened to ask:

"Oh, Mr. Carter, is there something of which I am ignorant? Or have I done wrong in any way?"

Nick turned to her and gravely answered:

"No, Miss Page, you have done nothing wrong—far from it! But there is considerable of which you are ignorant."

"Oh, sir, what do you mean?"

"Wait just one moment, and I then may be able to tell you," said Nick, rising. "I have something here that I wish to show you."

He went to his library desk and took from a drawer the silver jewel casket which he had brought from Central Park.

When he turned he held it in his extended hand, and the eyes of the girl suddenly fell upon it.

Instantly she leaped to her feet, as pale as death itself.

Then a scream, as of sudden, ungovernable terror, rose from her lips and rang with piercing shrillness through the house.

"Catch her, Chick—she's fainting!" yelled Nick, with eyes ablaze. "By Heaven! we've struck the trail at last!"

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL.

Nick Carter was a little perplexed.

Miss Violet Page had recovered from her sudden swoon, and although still very pale she sat gazing calmly at the silver jewel casket, which Nick was again displaying.

Somewhat to Nick's surprise, considering the girl's abrupt collapse upon first beholding the casket, Miss Page had just declared that she had never seen it before that evening.

"You never saw it before?" exclaimed Nick, almost incredulously.

"Never until you produced it from your desk a few minutes ago," reiterated Violet.

"Why, then, were you so overcome upon seeing it?"

"I will tell you why, Detective Carter, yet I fear that you will think me very weak and foolish to have been so seriously affected."

"No; I think not."

"I had a terrible dream last night, sir," Violet now explained. "I dreamed that I was alone in an enormous graveyard at midnight, with a full moon revealing the dismal surroundings, the dark tombs, the staring, white headstones and the silent graves."

"Not very cheerful—certainly," smiled Nick.

"What followed was infinitely more terrible," continued Violet, with an irrepressible shudder.

"What was that?"

"I dreamed that I saw a grave near which I was standing suddenly begin to open, as if a living being were pushing up the ground from within. Then I saw a fleshless hand appear above the disturbed sods. Then a sightless human skull thrust itself forth, and presently, filling me with a terror I cannot describe, the entire skeleton emerged from the partly open grave, and arose and approached me."

"A grewsome dream, indeed," remarked Nick. "But what of the casket?"

"This of the casket, sir," concluded Violet. "In the skeleton's right hand, which was extended straight toward me while he approached, was a silver box—the exact likeness of the one

you hold, and which you so abruptly showed me a short time ago."

"Ah, I see," nodded Nick.

"In my present nervous condition, Detective Carter, the sight of the real casket, after so horrible a dream, was more than I could sustain. Fairly before I knew it, I had fainted."

"A curious dream and a startling sequence," said Nick. "Evidently coming events have been casting their shadows before. I am sorry to have shocked you so severely."

"Pray don't speak of it, Mr. Carter," protested Violet. "I am now quite recovered."

"Then we will at once proceed to business again," said Nick. "Am I to infer, Miss Page, that you know nothing at all about this casket?"

"Absolutely nothing, sir," declared Violet.

"Have you ever heard your maid, Mary Barton, speak of possessing such a jewel box?"

"Never, sir."

"Nevertheless," said Nick, pointedly, "this casket was found beside her dead body in Central Park this afternoon."

A half-suppressed cry broke from Violet upon hearing this.

"Oh, sir, then that must have been the package mentioned by Harry Boyden," she cried, excitedly.

"What's that?" demanded Nick. "Have you seen Boyden since his arrest?"

"Yes, sir."

"When and where?"

"He was arrested at my home about half-past six, sir. When I learned for what and heard the particulars, I was advised by my landlady to appeal at once to you."

"Did you come directly here?"

"I did, sir; as fast as a carriage could bring me."

"Ah, now we shall get at it," declared Nick. "Tell me, Miss Page, just what Boyden said about Mary Barton."

"Why, sir, he said he left her alive and well about half-past five."

"Where?"

"On her way through the park," replied Violet. "He had met her about five o'clock, and they walked about in the park for a short time. Then he told her that he had an errand to do, after which he was coming to call upon me. Then Mary laughed and replied that she would see him later."

"That doesn't smack very strongly of suicide, Chick," remarked Nick, with a glance at the former.

"I should say not," replied Chick, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Did Boyden know where Mary went after he left her?" inquired Nick, reverting to his visitor.

"No, sir. He declared to the officer that he did not."

"What mention did he make of a package carried by the girl?"

"He stated that Mary had what appeared to be a small, square box, done up in brown wrapping paper, and secured with a string."

"Did he make any inquiries about it?"

"He asked her what it was, and she told him it was for me."

"Did she tell him where she got it?"

"Yes, sir, she did; and I am quite mystified by it."

"Please explain," said Nick. "What did the Barton girl say about the parcel?"

"She said it was given to her by a woman whom she had met on Fifth Avenue a short time before."

"An acquaintance?"

"No, sir; a strange woman," continued Violet. "Yet the stranger must have known Mary, and that she lived with me, for she asked her if I was at home."

"And then?"

"When told that I was, she gave Mary the package and asked her to deliver it to me, into my hands only, as it was a gift from a friend."

"Was the name of the friend mentioned?"

"I think not, sir. The woman cautioned Mary against opening the package, stating in explanation that she wished me to be the first to see what it contained."

"These are the facts which Mary Barton told to Harry Boyden, are they?" demanded Nick, with an ominous ring stealing into his voice.

"Yes, sir, they are."

"And the statements which Boyden, in turn, made to the officer by whom he was arrested at your home?"

"That is right, sir. I heard them from Harry's own lips."

"Did Mary Barton have any idea of the identity of the woman from whom she received the package?"

"I think not, sir. She told Harry that the woman was veiled, and that she could not see her face. The incident seemed so strange, sir, that Mary gave Harry Boyden all of these particulars."

"Did she describe the strange woman, her form or her attire?"

"I think she stated that the woman was plainly clad. Nothing more definite that I know of."

"In fact, Miss Page, you have now told me all that you know about the case, haven't you?"

"Really, sir, I think I have," admitted Violet, with a look of anxious appeal.

Nick drew out his watch and glanced quickly at it.

"Ring for a carriage, Chick," said he abruptly. "We have no time to lose."

"I'll call one at once," nodded Chick, as he sprang up and hastened from the room.

"Am I to depart now, Detective Carter?" asked Violet, beginning to tremble. "Oh, sir, will you not give me some word of encouragement before I go? I am sure that Harry Boyden never committed—"

"Hush!" interposed Nick, rising and taking her kindly by the hand.

"I cannot at present tell you, Miss Page, what I think of this case. I will say this, however, if Harry Boyden is, as you so firmly believe, innocent of this crime, I will not rest until I have proved him guiltless."

"Oh, Detective Carter, how am I to thank you?" cried the girl, with her tearful eyes raised to Nick's kindly face.

"By not trying to do so," said he, smiling. "And by carefully following a few directions which I shall now give you."

"I will follow them to the very letter, sir," cried the grateful girl.

"First, then, go home and borrow no further trouble about young Boyden," said Nick, impressively. "Second, disclose to no person that you have called upon me, or that I have any interest in the case. Third, say nothing about the jewel casket, and display no personal knowledge of the affair. Fourth, do not come here again unless I send for you. And, finally, rest assured that I will do all in my power to have young Boyden at liberty as soon as possible. To remain in custody a short time, however, will not seriously harm him, and in a way it may do me some service. Can you remember all that?"

"Indeed I can, sir; and I will obey you in all!" cried Violet, with much feeling.

"That's right," smiled Nick, as he escorted her to the door. "You shall not lose anything by so doing."

"Ah, I am sure of that, sir. You are so very kind, and I am so glad that I came to you."

"Well, well, we shall see," laughed Nick, with a paternal caress of her shapely white hand. "By the way, Miss Page, since I now happen to think of it," the crafty detective indifferently added, "wasn't there a Hindoo juggler, or snake charmer, or something of that sort, connected with your late vaudeville company?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Pandu Singe."

"Ah, that is his name, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he still in the city?"

"I am not sure, Mr. Carter; but I think that he may be, for he is signed with the company for next season."

"Do you know where he has been living?"

"Yes, sir. I have seen his house address on letters forwarded to the theater. Do you want it, sir?"

"If you can recall it, yes," smiled Nick, producing his notebook. "I am making a study of the Hindoo language just at this time, and I would like to consult Pandu Singe about certain books on the subject."

Miss Page did not suspect any duplicity in this, and she cheerfully gave Nick the address of the snake charmer, whereupon the detective graciously thanked her, and then escorted her to her waiting carriage.

As it rolled rapidly away a second hack came bowling up to the curbstone in front of Nick's residence. It was the carriage for which Chick had sent a call.

"Don't cover your horses, cabbie!" cried Nick, sharply. "Wait about three minutes, and we'll be with you."

"Right, sir!"

And Nick dashed back up the steps and into the house, meeting Chick in the hall.

"What do you make of it, Nick?"

"Make of it?" cried Nick, with a laugh. "It's a cinch, Chick, dead open and shut. Grab your hat and come with me. I'll explain in the carriage."

"Good enough! I'm with you, old man!"

"And we have no time to lose," cried Nick, "Now, then, we're off."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRIME AND THE MEANS.

Yes, Chick, it's as simple as two plus two, and we'll presently try to bag a part of our quarry. But first of all, I want a bit of corroborative evidence which I expect to get from that Hindoo snake charmer, Pandu Singe."

"Going there first, Nick?"

"Yes; it will not take long. Then I think we shall have the strands for a rope strong enough to hold that she-devil who murdered Mary Barton," grimly added Nick.

These remarks were made while the carriage containing the two detectives was speeding through the city streets, then bright with the light and life of the early evening.

"What a dastardly crime it was, Nick," observed Chick.

"It was the crime of a treacherous demon."

"With jealousy the chief motive, eh?"

"No doubt of it."

"Yet her venomous arrow found the wrong mark."

"That's just the size of it," said Nick. "In the light of what you saw and heard on the stage that night, it is plain that Cervera is passionately in love with Venner."

"Surely."

"You remember that you saw him talking with Violet Page, and then observed Cervera in the opposite wings, angrily watching something or somebody out of your range of view. Plainly enough, now, she was watching Venner and the singer."

"No doubt of it," declared Chick. "And she looked fit to use a poniard then and there."

"Jealousy," growled Nick. "She had been secretly watching Venner. She had discovered his love for Violet, and decided that the girl was a rival to be feared. Her fiery Spanish blood would shrink at nothing. She went the limit, and tried to murder her rival. In so doing, however, she but killed another."

"She must have worked adroitly to have accomplished what she did."

"It may not have been so very difficult," replied Nick. "She was on the stage each night, and also that infernal snake den. She quietly learned which of the venomous reptiles would best serve her deadly purpose, and then found an opportunity and a way by which to secretly steal it."

"A hazardous job at that," muttered Chick.

"The jealousy of such a woman fears nothing," Nick rejoined. "To lure the desired snake into a box, and then take it home and confine it in the jewel casket, may have been done quite easily."

"It must have been done before the company closed its engagement."

"No doubt," admitted Nick. "Then Cervera was too crafty to use it at once. She waited nearly a week. Then she dressed herself in cheap attire, put on a thick veil, and lay in wait for her rival's maid and companion, to whom she gave the package and her instructions regarding it."

"What first led you to suspect the crime and the means, Nick?" inquired Chick, curiously.

"Several facts," explained Nick. "The girl's sudden death seemed peculiar. The jewel casket beside her was empty, at once suggesting that something had been removed or fallen from it. Yet nothing was to be found."

"That's true."

"The paper wrapper was punctured with a pin in many places, the holes running even through the lining of the casket. That fact, too, was suggestive. People are not in the habit of doing up parcels and then punching them full of holes with a pin."

"Well, hardly."

"Cervera made those holes, Chick, in order that her venomous captive might not expire for want of air."

"No doubt of it, Nick. But what do you think led Mary Barton to open the package after having been told not to do so?"

"Curiosity, perhaps," replied Nick. "Or possibly she considered the circumstances to be so strange that she felt that she had a right to open it. Be that as it may, it is plain that Mary Barton sat down on the park seat, after leaving Boyden and there briefly considered the matter."

"How do you arrive at that deduction, Nick?"

"From the tiny tinge of fresh blood about one of the pinholes on the interior of the lining," explained Nick. "The stain must have come from the point of the pin, and when the pin was drawn out of the box, not when it was thrust into it. In the latter case the pin point would have been cleansed before passing through the lining, and the stain would have been on the outside rather than the inside."

"Surely."

"Then it at once became plain that Mary Barton, while sitting there, had thrust her hat pin through one of the previously made apertures, possibly aiming to discover in this way what the box contained, and in so doing she probably pricked the confined reptile."

"Ah, I see," nodded Chick. "All this strongly indicated that something might have been confined in the casket."

"Yes, certainly. Not thus learning what the box contained," continued Nick, "Mary Barton decided to open it. The moment she raised the lid the snake, probably angered by its

wound and long confinement, instantly struck at her hand, snake-fashion, and buried its fangs in her wrist."

"Hence the tiny, red spot which you so quickly discovered."

"Precisely."

"Very shrewd of you, Nick."

"Greatly frightened, the girl probably fainted, and fell to the ground," added Nick, in conclusion of the deductions by which he had solved the remarkable mystery. "The snake instantly scurried away through the grass, and left no trail behind him. Before the girl could recover from her swoon, the deadly poison had done its work. The venom of some of these India snakes is horribly rapid in its action."

"That's true," cried Chick. "I saw one at the theater that evening, the venom of which would kill a man in ten seconds. A wee bit of a cuss at that."

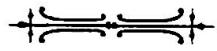
"Probably this was one of the same breed," said Nick, grimly. "At all events, I am sure that murder was the crime, and a snake the means."

"And Sanetta Cervera the criminal."

"Beyond the shadow of a doubt," declared Nick.

"And what do you expect to learn from the Hindoo?"

"I wish to know, in corroboration of my suspicions, whether Pandu Singe has missed any of his infernal reptiles."



"Ah, I see."

"If he has, my theory is surely correct, and we next must fix the guilt upon the guilty," said Nick, firmly. "I shall arrest Cervera this very night, providing the Hindoo informs me that — Ah, here we are at his door. Come into the house with me, Chick, and we'll see what he has to say."

They had stopped before an ordinary brick house on the East Side, and Nick quickly mounted the steps and rang the bell. The summons brought a corpulent English woman to the door, from whom Nick learned that the Hindoo and his interpreter were still there.

"Doesn't Pandu Singe speak English?" inquired Nick.

"Dear me, no!" exclaimed the landlady, with a mute yet visible laugh—visible in that her convolutions of flesh became observably agitated. "Not the first word, sir. He talks only a blooming jargon fit for snakes and spiders and that like."

Nick laughed agreeably, having a request on his tongue's end.

"He has moved his beastly den o' reptiles into my cellar to stay till next season, sir, a 'orror I'd not stand for a minute, so I wouldn't, only he pays me very 'andsome for the same."

"Then he intends remaining here all summer, does he?"

"He do," replied the woman, with startling terseness after the foregoing.

"I wish to see him briefly on business," said Nick. "Go and ask him if he will receive us."

The landlady complied, returning presently and inviting the two detectives into the house. She led the way to a rear room off the hall, at the door of which stood a swarthy foreigner, who bowed and smiled as the callers approached.

"'E's the hinterpreter," vouchsafed the landlady, in a wheezy whisper.

Nick nodded understandingly.

Reading by the light of a lamp on a table in the room sat the Hindoo snake charmer himself, clad in a rich, loose robe of Oriental fashion. He arose with much deliberation and dignity when the detectives entered, and gravely bowed in greeting, while his interpreter hastened to place chairs for the visitors.

Through the interpreter Nick quickly explained his business, and saw a look of surprise appear on the face of Pandu Singe when inquiries were made about the loss of a snake.

It took Nick but a short time to learn what he desired. Precisely as he expected, the Hindoo had missed one of his snakes about ten days before, one of the most venomous and dangerous of the lot.

Hearing no reports or complaints about the missing reptile, however, Pandu Singe had come to the conclusion that the snake had died in the den and then been devoured by one of his companions in captivity. So the Hindoo had let the matter drop, and had said nothing about it.

Nick did not disclose the true occasion for his inquiries, but invented a satisfactory explanation, and at the end of a quarter of an hour the two detectives departed and entered their waiting carriage.

"Rather a dignified chap, after all, that Pandu Singe," laughed Chick, as they settled themselves on the cushions.

"True," admitted Nick, thoughtfully. "Do you think, Chick, that we could make up to pass for those two swarthy Orientals?"

"Could we!" exclaimed Chick, promptly. "Well, Nick, I should say that we could."

"I think so, too."

"You could do the snake charmer, all right, and easily gabble a lingo that would pass for his."

"Well, rather," laughed Nick.

"And if I was wise to the game you wished to play I easily could act as the interpreter, and run the conversation correctly on my own hook."

"No doubt of it."

"Do it? Why, surely we could," repeated Chick "Why did you ask?"

"I think it may yet become necessary or desirable to make a move of that kind," replied Nick.

"Why so?"

"Because, as I have suspected all along, I still think there is some big game in the wind, with the Kilgore gang back of it, and that the murder of this Barton girl may have some connection with it, or at least give us a clew to it."

"Egad! I hope so, Nick."

"We soon shall see."

"Going after Cervera now?"

"Yes; at once," said Nick, with grim austerity. "We shall find her at home, as usual. She'll not imagine that I can have got on her track as quickly as this, so no doubt I can easily land her. Before midnight I want bracelets on the white wrists of that Spanish dare-devil."

CHAPTER XII.

CLOSING IN.

There was, indeed, as Nick Carter shrewdly suspected, a mysterious bond between the several crimes thus far engaging his attention, and the secret operations for which David Kilgore and his gang had ventured into the city of New York.

Nick had remarked, however, that the game would become as hazardous and stirring as one could desire, as soon as it was fairly driven from cover.

And Nick began to drive it from cover that very night.

Shortly before nine o'clock, and just as the two detectives were parting from the Hindoo snake charmer, Mr. Rufus Venner rang the bell at the door of Cervera's uptown residence.

It was answered by Cervera herself, much to Venner's surprise.

"Where's the butler to-night?" he abruptly demanded, as he entered and closed the door.

"Gone," said Cervera, curtly.

"Gone?"

"I've sacked him along with all the rest."

"Not discharged all of your servants?"

"Nothing less."

"But why?" demanded Venner, with a frown settling about his dark eyes. "You cannot remain here alone."

"I don't intend to."

"But what are you going to do? When are you going?"

While thus speaking they had repaired to the library at the rear of the house, the room in which Nick had encountered the gang nearly a fortnight before. It was the only room then lighted. Even the hall through which they had passed was in darkness.

Yet Cervera was dressed in an elaborate evening gown, fitted close to her lithe, nervous figure, and augmenting in a marked degree her dangerous, dark beauty.

"You know where I am going—or should!" she replied, facing Venner, with an odd smile on her red lips.

"Not to the diamond plant?" cried he, with a start.

"To the diamond plant—yes!"

"Impossible!"

"You will find it's not impossible, Rufe," she retorted. "I generally go where I wish, and do what I undertake. I have already sent my own jewels and other valuables there by Pylotte. He was here this morning."

"But consider, Sanetta," protested Venner, with a darker frown. "Think of what chances you are taking."

"Of what?"

"Suppose Nick Carter suspects you, and has a shadow on your movements—"

"Bah!" interrupted Cervera, with a snap and flash of her black eyes. "I care nothing for Nick Carter. *Caramba!* do you think I fear him? I will fool and foil Nick Carter as I have fooled and foiled his betters. I shall go to the plant to-morrow, and that settles it."

"Stop a bit," insisted Venner, almost angrily. "Do you forget that Kilgore and all his gang are there? Do you forget that we are just about launching our gigantic enterprise? We now have nearly a million dollars' worth of diamonds manufactured, or in the process of making, and I already have begun to distribute them on the market at a fabulous profit."

"Well, I know all that. What has it to do with my going there?"

"Such a move on your part may give Carter a clew to our location," declared Venner.

"Oh, no, it won't," sneered Cervera, scornfully. "I'll look out for that."

"Discovery would ruin all, and possibly land the whole gang behind prison bars."

"Faugh! I'm as well at the plant as here, and there I am going. You let me alone to evade the Carters."

"But why in thunder are you so determined to make this change?" demanded Venner.

An amorous fire came stealing into the woman's resolute eyes, and she shrugged her shapely shoulders significantly.

"You should know why without asking," she slowly answered, with her gaze fixed upon his changing countenance. "It is because I love you, Rufe, and wish to be where you spend so much of your time."

"So much of my time?" echoed Venner, inquiringly.

"So at least you tell me."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I know that five days and nights have passed since you came here to see me," cried Cervera, bitterly. "I have only your own word in explanation of your neglect."

"That should be enough," said Venner, curtly.

"Yet a man after a new love does not shrink from lying to an old," retorted Cervera.

"Pshaw! You are jealous again."

"A woman who loves as I love is always jealous."

"Of whom now?"

"You know of whom."

"I tell you I have not seen Violet Page since the theater closed."

"I have only your word for it," repeated Cervera, with incredulity bright in her sensuous eyes. "You know what I told you, Rufe. I'll not tamely permit that pale-faced nightingale to come between you and me. You know what I told you. I would kill her as I would a—a snake!"

Despite his own stiff nerves, Venner recoiled from the look on the woman's desperate face. Her voice had fallen to a hiss like that of the reptile mentioned.

"You are mad, Sanetta," he cried, irritably. "You have no occasion for this jealousy and hatred."

"I have had! You know that I have had—and your face shows it!"

"You have none now—absolutely none now!"

His emphatic declaration fell upon Cervera with an effect which Venner did not at first understand.

She sprang quickly toward him, gripping him hard by the wrist, while her every nerve seemed stimulated with sudden agitation.

"None now? None now—now?" she fiercely reiterated, in inquiring whispers. "Do you mean that—that it is done? that it is done?"

"Done?" gasped Venner, amazedly. "Is what done? What the devil are you driving at?"

She drew back, searching his eyes with hers, and hers were like those of a demon, in her momentary suspense.

"Then it isn't—it isn't?" she hissed, through her white teeth. "I thought from what you said that it was. I thought—"

"Good God! what do you mean?" cried Venner, aghast for a moment.

Then, struck with a sudden recollection, he turned and snatched an evening paper from a pocket of his coat, which he had tossed on a chair. He had recalled certain leader lines which had caught his eye earlier in the evening, yet which he then had not had sufficient interest to follow.

Now he hurriedly opened the paper and read the story, or so much of it as enabled him to guess the truth.

It was the newspaper story of the girl found dead in Central Park that afternoon, with the mystery involving the sudden fatality, and the names of the murdered girl and her mistress, Violet Page.

A half-smothered oath of horror and dismay broke from Venner, after a moment.

It brought Cervera to his side, and she snatched the paper from him and read—the story of her own failure; the miscarriage of her own jealous and murderous design.

She suppressed the shriek of mingled disappointment and fury that rose to her twitching lips, then passionately cast the paper upon the table.

"Well, what do you make of it?" she demanded, glaring at Venner's colorless face.

"No need to ask," he replied, hoarsely. "You know what I make of it."

"You think I did it?"

"I know you did it!"

"And killed the wrong girl?"

"And killed the wrong girl!"

"Can you guess how?"

"I don't care how. I know that you did it."

"You will not betray me?" hissed Cervera, crouching before him, with eyes never leaving his.

"I have no wish to betray you."

"You dare not! you dare not!"

"I shall not!"

"If you do—"

The woman checked her words for an instant, and ran her hand into the bosom of her dress. When she drew it forth it gripped a naked poniard, upon the polished blade of which the rays of light flashed with many a wicked gleam and glint.

"If you do," she repeated, "I will send you after her, Rufus Venner! I will do even more! I will expose our whole game, and our whole gang!"

"I have said that I shall not betray you, nor will I," cried Venner, signing for her to put up the weapon. "Yet you were mad, Sanetta. You had no grounds for such jealousy, no occasion for such a crime."

"I had—and you know it! I told you I would do it."

"Well, you have tried it, at least," growled Venner, forcing a smile to his gray lips.

"And you dare not betray me," repeated Cervera, thrusting the glittering weapon within her dress. "I have not failed entirely, Rufe, since it makes the criminal tie between you and me all the stronger. It binds us together with links of steel, Rufe, and they are stronger far than any marriage contract."

"Then you love me like that, eh?"

"You know that I do."

"Yet your infernal jealousy, and your determination to quit this house and go to the plant with the gang, may yet ruin us all. If Nick Carter were to get a clew—"

"Bah!" Cervera fiercely interrupted. "I despise him, not fear him! I tell you again, I will fool and foil Nick Carter, as I have fooled and foiled his betters!"

"His better as a detective never lived, Sanetta."

"I care not! I defy him, and will yet show you that—"

"Hush! Hark! A cab has stopped outside!"

Cervera changed like a flash.

With the bound of a leopard, one of those lightning moves with which she could electrify an audience from the stage, she crossed the adjoining room, which was in darkness, and reached the front window.

One glance through the lace draperies was enough.

Nick Carter was just alighting from his carriage.

Cervera darted back and rejoined Venner.

"It is Carter—Nick Carter himself!" she fiercely whispered, with all the fire of her passionate Spanish nature ablaze in her eyes.

"Carter! Good God!"

"Be off, Rufe, and leave him to me!"

"To you alone?"

"Yes."

"He already is on your track for this crime."

"I'll foil him yet! Leave him to me alone!" Cervera fiercely cried. "Be off by the back stairs, then through the stable and the side alley. Go to your own home, and from there signal Kilgore to have the secret way to the plant open for me. Here —the paper! Take it away with you! I'll elude Carter—"

"But he may arrest you at once," protested Venner, excitedly. "If he does—"

"*Caramba!* do you stop to question?" Cervera furiously interrupted. "If he takes me from this house he will take me—dead!"

"But—"

"Quick—he's at the door! Leave him to me alone, and do what I told you! Away! There's the bell!"

Venner caught up his coat, darted down the back stairs and quickly departed by the way mentioned.

At the same time, while Nick's summons was still echoing through the great house, Sanetta Cervera swept haughtily through the main hall, switched on the electric light, and then opened the front door.

She appeared as cool and composed as if she had just arisen from her dinner.

Yet in the vestibule stood the one man whom she had most cause to fear, the man who now held her fate in his hand—Nick Carter.

CHAPTER XIII.

CRAFTY CERVERA.

Good-evening, Mr. Venner. Oh, it's not you!"

"Oh, yes, 'tis!" said Nick, dryly. "It's I all right, and I'm it. You appear surprised at seeing me, Señora Cervera."

Cervera had begun, then stopped, then uttered the startled exclamation; and all with the utmost coolness, with the air of one stirred only by genuine surprise, and as if without the slightest fear or dismay upon beholding Nick Carter in the vestibule.

So perfectly natural was her artful assumption, that it rather deceived Nick for a short time.

In response to his dry remarks, the artful jade now nodded and began to laugh.

"Surprised? Well, rather!" she exclaimed, in animated tones. "I was expecting our mutual friend, dear Mr. Venner, and

supposed it was he who rang. But I'm just as pleased to see you."

"Yes?"

"Surely! Come in, Detective Carter. You are very, very welcome. I shall be so glad to renew our brief acquaintance. In fact, Detective Carter, I am quite charmed to see you."

"You'll not feel so chipper and charmed when you learn my business," said Nick to himself, as he entered and followed her to the library.

"Take a chair, Detective Carter, and try to feel perfectly at home," laughed Cervera, with bantering vivacity. "You have been here before, you know."

"Yes, indeed, I know," said Nick, dryly. "The night I had a taste of a choke pear, at the hands of your faithful guardians."

"Ah! but you shall be better treated this time," smiled Cervera, dropping into a chair opposite the detective, and fixing her sensuous, dark eyes on Nick's calm, unreadable face.

"I hope so, señora," he replied. "By the way, what has become of those two stalwart guardians of your treasures? Do you still retain them in your employ?"

It was second nature to Nick to feel his way in this crafty fashion, yet he did not really expect any resistance in arresting Cervera, who now laughed and shook her head, replying:

"No, I have let them go."

"That so?"

"I have no use for them at present."

"Why is that?"

"My engagement at the theater has closed, and I seldom have occasion to wear my diamonds. I have placed them all in a safe deposit vault."

"Ah! I see."

"So I have no need for my guardians, Detective Carter, with only myself here. Nobody would want me personally, you know," she added, with a bold laugh.

Nick's firm lips drew a little closer.

"On the contrary," said he, pointedly, "somebody does, want you personally."

"Oh! is that so?" cried Cervera, as if amused.

"Very much so, señora."

"And who does me the honor, pray?"

"I want you," said Nick, bluntly.

"You, Detective Carter! Why, sir, what an idea! I wouldn't have believed it of you."

"Yet it is true, nevertheless."

"Well, well," repeated Cervera, with a pretty shrug, "I am really glad to hear you say so. For what do you want me, Detective Carter?"

Not once had Nick's searching gaze left her brazen countenance, and despite her outward display of badinage, his steadfast and penetrating eyes were making her secretly uneasy.

"I want you," said Nick, pointedly, "for that ugly 'Jack-in-the-box' trick which you perpetrated this afternoon."

Cervera's eyes emitted a single swift, fiery gleam, and her red lips drew closer. Yet she cried, still pleasantly:

"What do you mean by that, Detective Carter? Is it a joke?"

"You'll find it no joke."

"If it is, sir, I don't see the point."

"You will have a chance to look for it at the Tombs," replied Nick, with grim quietude. "Señora Cervera, I want you to go along with me."

"The Tombs! Go with you! What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are now under arrest."

"Arrest! For what?"

"For the murder of a girl named Mary Barton," Nick bluntly rejoined, ignoring the woman's increasing display of amazement and resentment.

"Mary Barton!" cried Cervera. "I never heard of the girl."

"Nevertheless," said Nick, sternly, "you met her on Fifth Avenue this afternoon, and gave her a jewel casket containing a venomous snake, which you had stolen from the den of Pandu Singe, and by which means you inadvertently killed Mary Barton, instead of another for whom your infernal design was intended. I am aware of all of your late movements, señora, you see."

"I see that you are a devil!" cried Cervera, with a sudden passionate outburst. "How dare you come here with such a story as that?"

For a moment at least, the fact that Nick already had discovered nearly every detail of her infamous crime—though committed only a few hours before—almost completely unnerved her, and her changing countenance, her irrepressible outbreak, and the violent agitation of her lithe, nervous figure, were tokens of self-betrayal by no means unobserved by Nick.

"You'll have a chance to refute the story before a judge and jury," Nick curtly answered. "At present you are in my custody, however, and you must go with me."

Cervera rose to her feet, trembling visibly, and gripped the back of her chair as if for support.

"There must be some terrible mistake, Detective Carter," she now cried, with well-feigned distress and alarm. "Surely you do not mean this, sir? Surely you do but jest?"

"On the contrary, señora, I mean every word that I have said."

"That I am under arrest?"

"Yes."

"And must go with you?"

"Precisely."

"To the Tombs?"

"To the Tombs, señora."

"Oh! this is dreadful—dreadful!" craftily moaned Cervera, with tears now filling her eyes.

"I am sorry for you, señora, but I must do my duty," said Nick, rising.

"I know you must—but, oh! what shall I do? To whom can I appeal? Oh! if Mr. Venner were only here!"

"You can send a messenger for him later, or dispatch one of your servants from here," suggested Nick.

"I have none here," sobbed Cervera. "They are all out, and I am alone. I have no one—"

She suddenly stopped, then drew herself up with resentful dignity, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I am a fool to be so weak!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "Detective Carter, I know nothing of the crime you mention. I

never heard of Mary Barton. This arrest is an outrage, and I will appeal to the highest court in the land for vindication!"

"That's your privilege," said Nick, shortly. "But at present you must go with me."

"I cannot go as I am," declared Cervera, passionately stamping her foot. "I am in evening dress—attired to receive a caller. I shall take cold if I go out of doors in—"

"Oh, you may change your dress," Nick curtly interrupted, the need of which was decidedly obvious. "I'll give you time for that."

"How very kind," sneered Cervera, with a bitter flash of her black eyes. "You shall yet suffer for this affront, Detective Carter."

"All right," said Nick. "But I have no time to speculate upon it now, so get yourself ready. Wait a bit, my lady! I'll go along with you!"

"With me? You insult me!"

"Oh, no, I don't. I want a look at your chamber before letting you out of my sight. I've seen rooms with more than one way out, and I don't intend that you shall elude me."

"You're a suspicious coward, sir!"

"Stow all that, señora, and lead the way," commanded Nick, bluntly.

Pale and resentful, with a sneer on her lips, Cervera led the way through, the hall, playing her part so artfully that Nick, ignorant of her late interview with Rufus Venner, was not much inclined to suspect her of duplicity just then.

Upon reaching the top of the hall stairs, Cervera switched on another light, and then that which illumined her chamber, into which she haughtily led the detective.

"A fine affront to suffer," she bitterly exclaimed, throwing herself into a chair. "Your conduct is despicable! You are no gentleman!"

"I am a detective," retorted Nick, "and I come pretty near knowing my business."

"Oh! you do," sneered Cervera. "Plainly that is the limit of your knowledge. You may not be as wise as you think."

Nick made no reply, but looked sharply about the room.

It was a large, square chamber, and elaborately furnished. The two windows were well above the street, and offered no chance for escape. There were but two doors, that leading into the hall and the one leading into a large closet in the opposite wall.

Nick opened the latter, and found the closet hung with Cervera's extensive wardrobe. He thrust his arm along the garments hanging at either side, and sounded the three walls, and then the closet floor, all of which appeared perfectly firm and solid.

Even these precautions seemed quite needless to Nick, however, it being a rented house, and Cervera presumably uninformed of his coming.

"Now, señora, you may have just ten minutes to make ready," said he, as he rejoined her. "I shall leave this chamber door open, and will wait for you in the adjoining hall. Can you whistle?"

"Whistle?"

"Yes, whistle! You know what it is to whistle, don't you?"

The sneer on Cervera's red lips, as she arose from her chair, became almost a smile.

"Yes, I can whistle after a fashion," she admitted.

"Well, then, you keep whistling all the time you are alone here," Nick sternly commanded. "I will let you out of my sight to make these changes, but not out of my hearing."

"Suspicious fool!"

"Fool or not, you keep whistling," said Nick, bluntly. "If you let up for so long as a second, I'll come over yonder threshold in a way that you'll not fancy."

"But suppose I want to brush my teeth?" inquired Cervera, with a vixenish light in her evil eyes. "I cannot whistle and brush my teeth, Detective Carter."

"You'll have plenty of time to brush your teeth at the Tombs," said Nick, sharply. "Now look lively, mark you, and—keep whistling."

Cervera at once began to whistle.

Nick removed the key from the chamber door, and sauntered out into the hall, where he kept his ears constantly alert.

Not for a moment did the whistling cease, nor was there the slightest change in tone or character.

Nick could not have taken a more effective method to serve his present purpose.

At the end of eight minutes the whistling ceased, and Cervera coldly cried:

"Now you may come in, Detective Carter. I am about ready to go with you."

Nick at once entered the chamber.

Cervera had changed her evening dress for a complete suit of black, and was standing in the middle of the room.

"I suppose," said she, staring icily at the detective, "that I ought to thank you for your consideration."

"Don't trouble yourself," said Nick, curtly. "I have no time to waste."

"Yet just one word, Detective Carter, before we go."

"Let it be brief, then."

"You are said to be a very clever man, and no doubt you think you have me dead to rights in this case," said Cervera, with a mocking curl of her thin lips.

"Decidedly so."

"Yet you will find, Detective Carter, that a clever woman can always fool and foil a clever man."

"But you, my lady, are very far from being a clever woman," retorted Nick, with a gesture of impatience, signifying that he wished to leave with her at once.

"Nevertheless, I shall beat you at the finish, make no mistake about that," cried Cervera, scornfully. "Now, sir, I will put on my wrap, and go with you where you please."

With the last remark, she approached a peg in the open closet, as if to take down a dark shawl.

Instead, she suddenly turned quickly around and cried, with a taunting laugh:

"So long, Detective Carter! I really feel quite sorry to bid you —good-by!"

Nick started like a man electrified.

Cervera merely had pressed the peg on which the shawl hung, whereupon the whole back of the closet seemed to fall away instantly, disclosing a lighted passage beyond.

Nick caught a glimpse of it, and of the woman darting toward it, and he followed her like a shot from a gun.

As Cervera passed through the further opening and gained the lighted passage, she seized and threw a short lever just beyond the closet wall.

At the same moment Nick's weight fell upon the closet floor behind her.

It was like treading upon air.

The lever, like the peg, did not work in an instant.

Nick felt himself falling, and made a desperate clutch at the door jamb—only to miss it.

Then the closet floor, with the detective upon it, went speeding down like an elevator cut loose from a top story.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN A WARM CORNER.

The crash with which Nick Carter vaguely expected his career might be abruptly ended, as the floor upon which he had fallen prostrate rapidly descended, did not come.

The terrific downward speed suddenly decreased, then became more gradual, all in the bare fraction of a second; and then the rushing sound of compressed air escaping through narrow crevices fell upon the detective's ears.

Nick immediately guessed the truth.

The falling closet floor was that of an elevator, no longer in use as such, yet which still worked on the slides of the elevator well, and evidently had been cleverly adjusted for just such an emergency as that depicted.

Presently there came a heavy jar, and then the downward motion ceased. The close-fitting floor at first had fallen so swiftly that the confined air in the well beneath it had become so compressed as to form an air cushion, which finally let the

floor completely down only after the air had gradually escaped. It was this escaping air Nick heard during the last moments of his fall.

The entire episode began and ended in but little more than a moment, however. Though considerably jarred, Nick pulled himself together, and gazed up through the darkness at the bottom of the well.

Cervera was peering down from the lighted passage three stories above him, Nick having made a clean drop into the cellar of the imposing residence.

That this entire contrivance was the work of the Kilgore gang, devised while they masqueraded at Cervera's house, Nick was thoroughly convinced.

"Hello!" Cervera suddenly cried, still gazing down into the darkness enveloping Nick. "Are you there, Mr. Carter?"

Nick stared up at her, but made no answer.

At the same time he felt quietly over the walls of the well, in the hope of finding some way of escape.

It riled him not a little, the thought of having been so deftly caught in a trap, almost entirely owing to his having been overconfident, an assurance only very natural under the circumstances.

The possibility that this woman might now elude him for a time was also a thorn in Nick's mind.

"*Caramba!*" cried Cervera, with a mocking laugh. "Aren't you going to speak?"

Still no answer.

"Have you lost your tongue, Detective Carter? If you don't speak out, Mr. Smart Fellow, I shall drop something down that will light you up. I want a look at you, to know whether you're afoot or on horseback."

Nick remained in perfect silence.

Then Cervera disappeared.

"The she-devil!" muttered the detective. "What move next, I wonder?"

Again he felt quickly over the walls of the well, in the hope of finding some avenue of escape.

With a thrill of satisfaction, he now discovered one of the vertical strips of iron which are attached to two opposite walls of an elevator well, to steady the car and serve as slides for it to run upon. These iron strips are usually regularly notched to the depth of an inch or more, for the admission of an automatic break in the event of the rope parting.

"By Jove! this is not so bad," thought Nick. "It might serve for a ladder.

"To climb three stories with the tips of one's fingers and toes, however, and by means of a notched iron on the bare face of a wall, is a herculean and hazardous undertaking."

While he stood, measuring the altitude with his eyes, Nick heard Cervera returning.

Then a great bunch of flaming paper came flying down the well, and the detective was forced to leap aside to escape it.

She-devil, indeed, Cervera had set fire to a crumpled newspaper, with which to illuminate the bottom of the well.

"Ah, there you are!" she exultingly cried, on discovering Nick in the glare of the light. "On your feet, eh? You were lucky to escape, Detective Carter."

"And you'll be lucky if you escape Detective Carter," sternly retorted Nick, quickly stamping out the fire. "I'll finally land you, my crafty young woman, though I lie awake nights to devise a way."

Cervera gave vent to a shrill, vindictive laugh.

"Do you think you can do it?" she demanded, mockingly.

"You'll find that I can."

"Better men than you have tried—and failed."

"Yet I shall succeed."

"Do you feel quite sure of it?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I think I'd better see your finish this very night, since I now have you cornered!" cried Cervera, in taunting tones, "It may not be wise to defer it."

Then Nick beheld a second burning newspaper coming his way.

"Let up, you demon!" he shouted, angrily. "You'll set the house afire."

"Wouldn't it be a shame! And what would become of you?"

"Don't try it again, young woman, or worse may be your fate."

"Oh! is that so?" sneered Cervera, maliciously. "We'll see."

Down came another burning paper, and by the light of it Nick now discovered a closed door in one of the walls. It was directly under the closet door in Cervera's chamber, both of which evidently had once been used for entering the elevator.

The fact chiefly observed by Nick, however, was that the sill of the door was wide enough to offer him a safe footing. Though it was fully eight feet above his head, Nick resolved to attempt to reach it by means of the notched iron on the side wall.

Gripping the rough notches with his muscular fingers, and using those lower down for a foothold, as best he could, Nick hurriedly began the difficult ascent.

By the light from a fragment of burning paper, Cervera perceived his design, and greeted it with a scream of derision.

"I'll soon stop that, my fine fellow," she shouted, with vicious asperity. "Look out for yourself!"

White speaking, she touched a match to one of her dresses, which hung from a near peg on the closet wall, and dropped it blazing down the well.

Nick saw it coming, and was forced to drop back to the cellar floor.

"You vicious demon!" he cried, angrily. "Let up! You'll have the house on fire!"

"That's just what I intend doing—and you with it!" screamed Cervera, with a laugh. "I'll not leave you alive to get the best of me at some later day."

Then she set fire to a silk skirt, and dropped it after the other.

Nick had not yet been able to extinguish the first, and the situation was momentarily becoming more desperate. A cloud of smoke was filling the well, with no draft to carry it away, and the heat was already very oppressive.

Crouching on the curb of the lighted passage three floors above him, Cervera was laughing wildly, with her handsome face reflecting the bitter hatred by which she was inspired, as she hurriedly set fire to a third garment and dropped it down the well.

The smoke at the bottom had become so dense that Nick no longer could see her, but he felt quite sure that he could put an end to her present murderous game.

He drew his revolver and fired two quick shots in her direction. One bullet crashed through the ceiling above her. The second clipped a lock of hair from over the vixen's ear.

It brought a shriek of alarm to her lips, and she sprang quickly back from the curb over which she was stooping.

"*Caramba!*" she yelled, excitedly. "That's your game, is it?"

"You'll find it is, if you approach that opening again!" cried Nick, half choked with smoke, while he fiercely strove to extinguish the blazing garments.

"Oh, I'll not give you another chance at me!" screamed Cervera. "I'll push over something heavier, and crush out your life with—"

She suddenly stopped, then held her breath and listened.

The crash of a breaking door reached her ears, then hurried footsteps began falling on the main stairway leading to her chamber.

"Some one is coming!" she fiercely muttered. "Perhaps another detective! I must be off!"

Yet so bitter was her hatred of Nick, and so intensely enjoyable to her the trick she had served him, that she

lingered for an instant in the face of the impending danger, and screamed down the well, with a mocking laugh:

"I'm obliged to leave you, Detective Carter! While I'm gone—keep whistling!"

At the same moment Chick Carter rushed into the chamber and caught a glimpse of her through the wreathing smoke, as she fled through the lighted passage.

One glance at the scene gave Chick the entire situation.

He drew back, took a short run, and with a magnificent bound cleared the open well, and leaped squarely through the closet and into the lighted passage.

Then the crash of a heavy door, suddenly closed, and the shooting of bolts, told him that Cervera had prevented pursuit for a time at least, and Chick swung round to the open well, to see if Nick needed him.

"Hello, Nick!" he shouted. "The woman—"

"Let her go!" roared Nick, still fiercely fighting the flames that threatened the woodwork of the well. "Let her go—we'll get her later! First save the house!"

"How can I reach you?"

"Through a door under the one in her chamber," shouted Nick. "Try that."

Chick cleared the well with another leap, then dashed downstairs and into the parlor, which was lighted by the glare from both hall and library.

He quickly discovered the door—only to find it locked and the key removed.

Chick was promptly equal to so slight an emergency, however. Grasping a heavy stool near the piano, he swung it above his head, and with half a dozen rapid blows demolished most of the door, and forced it open.

A cloud of smoke floated into the room, but a glance showed Chick that Nick now had the flames extinguished.

"Are you all right, old man?" he demanded.

"Only a little in need of fresh air," gasped Nick. "You cannot reach down to me."

"Wait a bit, then. This will do the business!"

Chick had turned and snatched off the thick cloth covering of the piano, which he quickly twisted and lowered over the doorsill, and then braced himself to sustain Nick's weight.

"All right?" cried Nick.

"Yes. Come on!"

Nick drew himself up until he could grasp the sill of the door, then easily reached the floor and the clearer atmosphere of the parlor.

"Well, here's a pretty mess!" he growled, in tones of self-condemnation. "If ever I was done by a crafty jade, I've been done by one this night."

"How in thunder did it happen, Nick?" demanded Chick, with no little amazement.

Nick very quickly told him, and explained the occasion of his own lack of distrust and caution.

"It being a rented house, I did not look for any such trap as this," said he. "Furthermore, I did not believe that Cervera had any warning of my coming, and I felt satisfied that she was alone here. Have you seen anything of Venner while waiting in the cab?"

"Not a sign of him."

"It's odds, then, that he was here when I arrived, and made his escape by a back door," growled Nick. "If so, it goes to show that he is in with her and the Kilgore push, and not a blind victim to their cunning. We now must get some proof of that, Chick, and force that gang and their game to light. We at least have made a beginning, and now for another move."

"To-night?"

"At once!" declared Nick. "Cervera must find shelter somewhere, and it's very likely she will go to Venner's house. That must be our next point, and we will lose no time. Possibly we yet may land her before she finds cover."

"We can give it a try," cried Chick.

"Help me extinguish these lights, and then we'll be off again."

"I'm with you."

"What sent you into the house so suddenly?"

"The reports of your revolver," explained Chick. "I at once recognized its bark, and knew something was wrong."

"Ah! I see."

"I saw the light in the chamber, and supposed you might be letting the woman prepare to go with you," added Chick. "That was while I sat in the cab. But when I heard your gun, I smashed open the front door and bolted upstairs."

"Very lucky, too," nodded Nick. "That she-devil would have burned the house, and me in the bargain. But the end is not yet."

"Well, hardly!" laughed Chick, as they descended the front stairs and extinguished the last light.

"We'll stop an officer, and send him here to watch the house," said Nick. "Then we'll have a look at Venner's dwelling. It's my opinion, Chick, that our work has now begun in good earnest."

"Well, I reckon we shall prove equal to it," smiled Chick, rather grimly, as they hastened to enter the waiting carriage.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DIAMOND PLANT.

"This does settle it!"

"What do you mean, Dave?"

"It must be done?"

"We must get these Carters—that's what! If we don't get them, Spotty—you take my word for it—they'll get us!"

"Do you really think so, Dave?"

"Not think, but know so!" declared Kilgore, with emphasis. "I know these Carters, root and branch. They have now struck our trail, and they'll stick to it like bloodhounds till they run us down—unless we get them! It must be done, I say, and done promptly."

"Put them down and out?"

"Exactly. It's them—or us!"

"And why do you think, all of a sudden, Dave, that Nick Carter is so hot on our heels?"

"I'll tell you why, Spotty."

And Mr. David Kilgore, chief of the notorious diamond gang bearing his name, and one of the keenest and coolest criminals in or out of prison walls, removed his pipe from his mouth and his heels from the edge of the table, and drew forward in his chair to explain.

It was a curious place, that in which the speakers of the above were seated, in the bright glare of an electric light.

It was inclosed with four solid stone walls, with not a window or aperture through which a ray of light could be detected from outside.

Yet in one of the walls was a low, narrow door, also of stone, and so cleverly constructed and fitted that, when swung into place in the wall, it was comparatively beyond the detection of anybody ignorant of its existence. This door then stood open, but the aperture through the wall was heavily curtained.

Three of these walls formed the original foundation of an old and extensive suburban mansion, the location, ownership and present use of which will presently appear. The fourth wall, that with the door, was of more recent construction, and was built squarely across the original cellar of the house. It had been made to mask this secret subterranean chamber in which the Kilgore gang was then gathered.

The place was commodious, and contained some noteworthy objects. In one corner was a powerful hydraulic press. Near by was a splendid electrical furnace, capable of generating an extraordinary degree of heat. Against the adjoining wall were

several barrels of sulphur, of which only one was unheaded. Near by was a large box of anthracite coal, black and glistening in the rays of the arc light.

Parallel with the opposite wall was a workbench, laden with curious retorts, crucibles, test tubes, metal molds, and no end of tools, all of which plainly suggested the work of one versed both in chemistry and some mechanical art.

In the middle of the room was a square deal table, at which Kilgore was seated, with Matt Stall and Spotty Dalton, the original three of the Kilgore gang.

Two other persons were present, however, and they were engaged in examining some work on the bench mentioned.

One of them was a tall, angular Frenchman, about sixty years of age, named Jean Pylotte. He had a slender figure, somewhat bowed; but his head was massive, in which his gleaming, gray eyes were deeply sunk, like those of a tireless student and hard worker.

His companion at the bench just then was Sanetta Cervera, the Spanish dancer—the murderess of Mary Barton—the vicious dare-devil who had served Nick Carter one of her evil tricks that very evening.

Cervera had arrived at the diamond plant less than an hour before, and had hurriedly told her confederates the whole story of her crime and her adventure with Nick.

Crime was too common with these outlaws, however, and loyalty to one another too natural, for Kilgore to censure his

only female confederate very severely. Yet as Kilgore now proceeded to explain, her crime had rendered their situation decidedly more alarming.

"I'll tell you why these Carters are now to be seriously feared," said he, nodding grimly at his hearers. "This last move of Cervera has hurt us severely."

"In what way?" demanded Spotty Dalton, the pock-marked chap who had relieved Venner's partner of the Hafferman diamonds about two weeks before. "I don't see just how, Dave."

"No more do I," put in Matt Stall.

"You'll see," replied Kilgore, "when I run over a few facts which led to our being here, and at work on our present game."

"Well, Dave, we're listening."

"One year ago we three were in Amsterdam, Holland, weren't we?"

"Sure."

"At work on a different kind of a game?"

"Yes."

"Only we three were then in the gang."

"That's right, Dave. Now there are seven of us, counting Venner and his partner."

"It was in Amsterdam that we first met her nibs," continued Kilgore, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of Cervera, who was so engaged with Pylotte that neither heeded the talk at the table.

"Yes, Dave, we met her just a year ago," nodded Dalton.

"She was then doing her dances in a theater there, and we naturally got our peepers onto her diamonds," Kilgore went on to narrate. "You fellows already know the scheme by which we tried to relieve her of them, which we came so near doing."

"Well, rather," grinned Dalton, as if the reminiscence was amusing.

"Then we learned from her own lips, and greatly to our surprise, that her sparks were not the real thing," smiled Kilgore. "At first we could not believe it. The goods deceived even us, old hands though we are. It was only when she told us about Pylotte, and the secret process by which he makes such extraordinary imitations, that we could believe her."

"That's right, Dave."

"She had stumbled by chance upon this clever French chemist and diamond cutter, and was working him to the extent of her ability. She even had got wise to his secret, and he was loading her with his marvelous gems in return for her affection. But we at once saw the way to something much more profitable, a game for making millions out of Pylotte's great discovery."

"Right again, Dave."

"So we told them about it, and found them willing," continued Kilgore. "We rung them into our gang, and planned the whole deal. We knew it would be dead easy to work off such clever stones for genuine goods. With plenty of such sparks on hand, and one big and reputable jeweler to help us work the market, the distribution of our goods and their substitution for genuine stones would quickly throw a cool million or two our way."

"Dead easy, Dave."

"But we decided that New York was the best field for such a gigantic enterprise," added Kilgore. "So we came here. With the help of Cervera, we got our grip on Venner, and then on his avaricious partner, Garside, whose business happened to be on its last legs. So they snapped like hungry fish at this chance to square themselves, by secretly swindling their own customers, and shoving our manufactured diamonds upon the entire market."

"Like hungry fish—h'm! that's no name for it," cried Matt Stall, with a mingled growl and laugh. "Rufe Venner was as ready to become a knave as any covey I ever crossed."

"So we established this plant for Pylotte to do his clever work in," continued Kilgore, disregarding the interruption. "Luckily, Venner already owned this old mansion, as well as that in which he lives; and fortunately, both places are somewhat secluded, with extensive grounds abutting. That enabled us to frame up a very snug and safe retreat."

"Sure it did."

"So we went to work," Kilgore proceeded, discursively. "We built our plant, placed our machinery, rigged a private telephone between this house and Venner's, and tapped the electric conduit with a secret wire, to give us light and feed our furnace."

"That was my work," nodded Stall, with a touch of pride.

"Right you are, Matt, and mighty good work, too," bowed Kilgore. "In a nutshell, boys, after two months' secret work, we have accomplished all we planned, and now have Venner sliding our goods upon the market at a fabulous profit. In a single year, barring these infernal Carters, every man of us should be a millionaire."

"But why this sudden fear of the Carters?" growled Dalton, impatiently.

"I'll now tell you why," cried Kilgore, with voice lowered, and an ugly gleam in his frowning eyes. "We cannot sack Cervera, nor put out her light, for she's too good and strong a card for us to lose. But in losing her head over Venner, and jealously doing up that girl to-day, she has given the Carters a clew by which to track us."

"How so, Dave?" muttered Stall, growing a bit pale.

"Through Venner, of course!" Kilgore forcibly argued. "Until this job of to-day, Carter has had no definite suspicion of Venner, a possibility which we headed off with that fake robbery. Now, however, since Cervera must lie low, and

Carter knows of her relations with Venner, he will suspect the latter and make him a constant mark, in the hope of landing the girl."

"By Heaven, that's so!" snarled Dalton, quickly seeing the point.

"And that's not the worst of it," added Kilgore. "The moment he suspects Venner, Carter will connect him with us, and know that that robbery was a put-up job. Then he'll begin to seek us and our game."

"But how can he locate us?"

"Locate us?" sneered Kilgore, acidly. "You don't know Nick Carter! I'll tell you, Spotty, he can smell a rat further than any ferret that ever shoved his nose under a miller's barn. As sure as death and taxes, Nick Carter will run us down and land us, every mother's son of us—unless we can get him, and put him down and out."

"By Heaven, I begin to think so myself," growled Stall. "If we —"

"There are no ifs, ands or buts about it, Matt," interrupted Kilgore, decisively. "We must down them both, Nick and Chick Carter, or our game is as good as done for."

"But how can we land them, Dave, and when?"

"I already have a plan, and I think the first move may be made this very night."

"What's the plan, Dave?"

"To lure both detectives into Venner's house, and there do them up. If we can get them to come there voluntarily, their fate may never be learned, and our tracks will be better covered than by doing the job elsewhere."

"That's true enough, since they're not likely to disclose their intentions, and if they come in disguise, no one about here will have recognized them."

"That's just my theory."

"But how can we lure them to Venner's house?"

"With the help of Pylotte, whom they do not know, nor ever heard of. He's a brainy dog, moreover, and crafty enough to blind them."

"But what's your scheme for to-night?" demanded Dalton.

"After what has happened," replied Kilgore, "it's a safe gamble that the Carters are at this moment watching Venner's house. If they are—but wait a bit! First hear my whole plan."

The three criminals drew their chairs closer, and in a very few minutes Kilgore had disclosed his entire design, a scheme so recklessly bold that it brought murmurs of amazement and misgivings from both his hearers, daring knaves though they were.

"It strikes me, Dave, that it's too long a chance for us to take, this giving Nick Carter a genuine clew to our game," objected Dalton, doubtfully.

"But no other clew will answer," declared Kilgore, forcibly. "You cannot fool Nick Carter with any false move or faked story; I'm already sure of that."

"So am I," nodded Stall. "He's too wise a guy to fool with."

"We are compelled to give him the real thing, and make him feel that he is up against a square deal, or no man among us can work the racket," added Kilgore. "With my scheme, however, Pylotte is just the covey to do the job, and land both Carters where we want them."

"And then?"

"Then it's our ability against theirs," snarled Kilgore, "If we go lame, with the odds all in our favor, we deserve to be thrown down."

"That's right, too," admitted Dalton.

"Will Pylotte undertake this sort of a job, think you?" inquired Matt Stall.

"Will he?" rejoined Kilgore, with an ugly gleam in his determined eyes. "He will, or—well, you know! Yes, Matt, he will; and he's just the man for the job."

The vicious significance with which he spoke plainly indicated that, though Cervera may have ruled her own roost,

there was but one chief of this gang, and that was Mr. David Kilgore.

He turned sharply about in his chair, and cried:

"Here you, Pylotte! Come and give us your ear! I have work for you to-night!"

Both Pylotte and Cervera quickly turned and hastened to join the gang at the table.

For twenty minutes Kilgore's project for outwitting and securing Nick Carter was earnestly discussed, and every detail of the plan carefully laid.

Then the four men stole quietly out of the house in company.

It then was a little after midnight.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CUNNING OF JEAN PYLOTTE.

Kilgore had reasoned shrewdly, in so quickly suspecting that Nick Carter would lose no time in getting a line on the Venner residence. Even while the diamond gang were discussing the plan by which to capture the Carters, the two detectives were at times within a hundred yards of the secret plant.

It was dark out of doors that night, with only a few stars in the clouded sky, and the wooded locality and neighboring streets were but poorly lighted.

It was in a northern suburb of New York, a section not yet much encroached upon by the spreading city, and the dwelling owned and occupied by Rufus Venner was that in which three generations of his family had lived and died.

It was a square, old house of brick, set fifty yards from the suburban street, and was flanked in either direction by extensive, ill-kept grounds, made damp and dark by the huge, old trees, which nearly covered the estate.

Back of the house, and off to one side, was a large wooden stable, fast running to ruin; while a rusty iron fence, falling to fragments in places, skirted the dismal grounds in front.

Beyond the trees, far to the rear, could be seen the roof and chimneys of an old, wooden mansion, fronting on another street, and having a very similar environment. There, too, the house and grounds were running to ruin and decay, both places being but crumbling monuments of former opulence and grandeur.

It was upon this scene that Nick Carter and Chick arrived just before midnight, having left their carriage at a remote corner, to await their return.

"Yonder is Venner's house, Chick," said Nick, as they picked their way along the unpaved sidewalk. "We'll vault this iron fence and steal across the grounds."

"It doesn't look much as if our quarry was there," observed Chick, as they scaled the fence.

"Their deeds are dark, and like seeks like," replied Nick. "They now may be making darkness their cover."

"Not a light in the house, is there?"

"None visible from this side. We'll steal between the house and stable, and have a look at the opposite elevation."

"Not much danger of being seen. It's as dark as a nigger's pocket under these trees."

"So much the better in case anyone is watching."

"Who lives here with Venner?"

"Only an elderly housekeeper, of whom I don't hear anything very good," replied Nick. "Venner is here but part of the time, I am told. In fact, I don't quite fathom his habits."

"Why so?"

"I can't learn what takes him from home so much of the time. He does not leave the city, nor patronize any hotel that I can discover, yet he frequently is away from this house overnight."

"Perhaps he secretly keeps another house, and is leading a double life."

"Possibly," admitted Nick. "He is on friendly terms with numerous women, I learn, and other quarters may be essential to designs of some kind. Quietly, now, and we'll slip across the back lawn."

Like shadows, as dark as the night itself, they silently reached a point from which they could view the north side of the house. Here they discovered that one of the lower rooms was lighted, with the curtain at the single window nearly drawn.

"Somebody is up," murmured Chick.

"We'll learn who, if possible."

"Going to have a look?"

"Yes. Come, if you like, but don't get into the glare from the curtain. Kilgore has a very wicked air gun, and if he and his gang are about here, we might invite a bullet."

"I'll have a care."

Stealing closer over the damp greensward, they approached the house and peered beneath the curtain mentioned. There was but one occupant of the room, which was a small library.

In an easy-chair near the table, with a newspaper fallen across his knees, sat Rufus Venner, apparently sound asleep.

This was only a part of the game, however, for Venner was wide awake. By means of their secret wire, he had been informed of Cervera's arrival at the diamond plant, and of Kilgore's designs upon Nick, and Venner at that moment suspected that he might be under the eye of the detective.

For nearly half an hour Nick waited for some sign of this artifice, but Venner in no way betrayed it.

Presently a clock on the mantel struck the half after one, and the sound appeared to awake him. He yawned, glanced at the clock, then took the lamp from the table and went up to bed. But never so much as a glance toward the window.

Nick led Chick away, and they returned across the lawn to a point beyond the stable.

"It rather looks as if Cervera had been here, doesn't it?" inquired Chick, with a grin.

"Yes," admitted Nick. "Two facts are very significant of it. First, that Venner is at home on this particular night; and, second, that he should be asleep in his chair after midnight. It has a fishy look."

"That's my idea, Nick, exactly."

"Yet the way to prove it doesn't appear quite easy."

"Not just yet. But who occupies that house over yonder, where the roof shows above the trees?"

And Chick pointed to the distant dwelling, little dreaming that the diamond plant and the gang they sought were established under its many-gabled roof.

This was not the first night Nick had watched Venner's house since the diamond robbery, the doubtful character of which he had suspected at the outset, and incidentally he had informed himself concerning Venner's neighbors.

"One Dr. Magruder, I am told, a retired physician from Illinois," he replied. "He bought the place at a forced sale some little time ago."

Nor did Nick, when thus replying, dream that Dr. Magruder and Rufus Venner were one and the same; or that, in attributing to him a double life of shameful iniquity, Chick had hit the nail squarely on the head.

"Come this way," added Nick.

"Where now?"

"We'll go down to the corner of the grounds, and watch the house for a time."

Before Nick's reply was fairly uttered, however, both detectives were startled by distant cries, which fell with frantic appeal on the midnight air.

"Help! Help! Help!"

The startling cry was thrice repeated, the last time as if choked in the speaker's throat, yet the direction of the sound was unmistakable.

"Something's up!" muttered Nick. "This way!"

With Chick at his heels, he tore across the wooded grounds and bounded over the iron fence at the street.

Then the occasion of the outcry at once became apparent.

Some two hundred yards away, in the yellow glare of one of the incandescent lights by which the little-frequented street was illumined, a man was battling desperately with three assailants, one of whom he had knocked to the ground.

Without a word, both detectives rushed down the road to his assistance.

As they drew nearer there came a flash of light, then the report of a pistol, followed by another shriek for help.

Then Nick saw one of the ruffians reel a little, as if shot, while a second hurled their victim to the ground. The third leaped to his feet at the same moment, yelling wildly:

"Look out! Scatter, boys! The cops are upon us!"

"Kilgore's voice, or I'm a liar," muttered Nick, over his shoulder.

Both detectives were still fifty yards from the scene of the furious conflict, and were running at the top of their speed along the rough road.

Before they could come near enough to use a weapon, however, the three ruffians scattered like frightened cats, leaping the wall near an adjoining woodland, into the gloom of which they speedily vanished.

It was obvious to Nick that pursuit would be vain, so he hastened to the side of the fallen man, who had been left prostrate in the road, and helped him to his feet.

The man was Jean Pylotte.

He was panting hard after the conflict, the fake character of which Nick could not then foresee. His coat was ripped up the back, his linen collar torn off, and he was deathly pale, with a smutch of blood across his cheek. In one hand he held a revolver, and in the other—a chunk of coal.

"Are you wounded, stranger?" Nick quickly demanded, as he studied the man's pale face.

"Not much—not badly, I think," gasped Pylotte, trembling violently. "But it's lucky you came. They'd surely have killed me."

Nick noticed that he spoke with a slight foreign accent, and was a man of considerable physical prowess.

"There's blood on your face," said he.

"It came from one of them, I think," said Pylotte, drawing his sleeve across his cheek to remove the stain. "I must have wounded one of them."

"It's a pity you did not kill him," said Nick, bluntly. "Was it you who fired the gun?"

"Yes. I tried to fire again, but one of them struck me down before I could do so. The ruffians came upon me before I fairly realized it."

"Do you know them?" inquired Chick.

"Only one of them, a man named John David," replied Pylotte, now appearing to pull himself together.

"John David, eh?" grunted Nick.

"He has swindled me, and I—I saw him at a theater to-night, and afterward followed him out here."

"For what? If he has swindled you, why didn't you have him arrested at the theater?" demanded Nick.

"Well, I—I wanted to learn where he lives. He must have discovered that he was being followed, and then tried to do me up."

Nick observed the speaker's faltering manner, and it increased his curiosity.

"Why do you wish to know where he lives?" he demanded.

Pylotte hesitated, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," said he, after a moment.

"Not believe you?"

"I hardly think so."

"Suppose you tell me, and see," suggested Nick, with a faint smile.

"I have no objection to telling you, none at all," Pylotte now replied. "The man I spoke of, John David, swindled me yesterday with two artificial diamonds."

"Ah! is that so?" cried Nick, with a significant glance at Chick. "What is your name, my man?"

"Jean Pylotte, sir."

"Who are you, and where do you live?"

"I am a Frenchman by birth, and arrived in New York only this week. My home is in Denver. I am a diamond cutter by trade, and came here to buy some gems for a Denver woman of wealth, who wishes to obtain a certain size and quality."

"Then you are a judge of diamonds?"

"One of the best," Pylotte modestly admitted, with a faint smile. "I am an expert judge of diamonds, and so it happened that I discovered the swindle of which I am a victim."

"Then you bought a diamond of the man who said his name was John David, did you?"

"I bought two, sir," nodded Pylotte. "They appeared like natural and very perfect stones when I first examined them, but after subjecting them to more careful tests, I found them to be the most extraordinary imitations I ever beheld."

"Artificial diamonds, were they?"

"Yes, artificial. But only the best of experts, and after the most rigid tests, could discover the fraud. I never saw such imitations. The stones are really almost as good as natural ones."

"Have you them with you?"

"Yes."

"You feel quite confident that they were manufactured, do you?"

"Oh, I am positive of it," cried Pylotte, with emphasis. "That is why I was secretly following the swindler."

"You wanted to discover his house, and learn how he made such perfect imitations, eh? Was that your motive, instead of having him arrested at the theater?"

"Well, yes, it was," admitted Pylotte, with feigned reluctance.

"Do you know any process for manufacturing diamonds?" Nick next demanded.

"I am pretty well informed on the subject."

"Quite an art, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"And one that could be made very profitable, perhaps?"

"I judge so."

"Put up your revolver," said Nick, abruptly. "What's that black object you dropped just now?"

Pylotte glanced down at his feet, then laughed faintly.

"That's odd," said he. "It's a piece of coal. I must have seized it from the road, thinking to defend myself with it."

"What is there odd in that?"

Pylotte laughed again.

"Diamonds may be made from coal," said he. "The fact that I should have got hold of a piece in the road here, while tracking that diamond swindler in search of his house, strikes me as being rather odd."

"So it was," said Nick, a bit dryly, thinking of Venner's house in the near distance.

Then he added, decisively:

"Put up your gun, Mr. Pylotte. I want you to go with me. I think you are the very man I want."

"Go with you!" exclaimed Pylotte, drawing back.

"If you please," said Nick, politely. "I want, at least, to hear more of your story."

"But who are you, sir?"

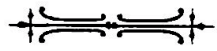
"My name is Nick Carter."

"Not the celebrated detective?" cried Pylotte, with feigned amazement.

"Precisely."

"That's quite sufficient, Mr. Carter!" the Frenchman now cried, with much bowing and scraping. "I'll go with you when and where you wish. If any man can run down these swindling ruffians, sir, you certainly are the man."

"Thanks," said Nick, dryly. "I'll take you home with me for the night."



CHAPTER XVII.

THE GAME UNCOVERED.

The following morning.

The clock in Nick Carter's library was striking nine.

Nick and Chick were seated at one side of the table, and Jean Pylotte occupied a chair at the opposite side.

Upon the dark cloth top of the table between them lay two large diamonds, declared by Pylotte to have been artificially made, the two with which he claimed to have been swindled.

Yet to the eyes of a layman they had all the qualities of natural gems, gleaming and glistening with magnificent fire in the cheerful sunlight of Nick's library.

Pylotte had invented a very clever and consistent story about himself and his mission in New York, as well as about the meeting and being victimized by the counterfeit diamond shover, and Nick as yet saw no occasion for seriously distrusting him, or connecting him with the Kilgore gang.

He rather suspected, in fact, that Pylotte had shadowed the swindler, whom Nick felt sure was Kilgore, with a view to learning just how the diamonds had been manufactured, and

possibly with a design to turn the discovery to his own advantage.

This was, indeed, the most natural deduction for Nick to arrive at, after considering all the circumstances.

"So you are confident that these stones are works of art, rather than of nature, are you?" inquired Nick, who had been carefully examining the gems.

"I am absolutely sure of it, Mr. Carter," declared Pylotte.

"Have you any idea how such counterfeits can be made?"

"Oh, yes."

"By what process and means, Mr. Pylotte?"

Pylotte hastened to explain.

"A natural diamond, Mr. Carter, is pure carbon, crystallized under enormous heat and pressure in the bowels of the earth."

"I am aware of that."

"Charcoal and graphite are also pure carbon, but not in a crystallized condition," continued Pylotte. "If that condition could be imparted to the substances mentioned, we should have the artificial diamond."

"How may that be done?" inquired Nick.

"By subjecting the substance to the same condition under which the natural diamond was crystallized."

"Heat and pressure?"

"Precisely," bowed Pylotte. "Attempts to thus manufacture diamonds have frequently been made. A Mr. Acheson, of Pittsburg, while so engaged, and in obtaining graphite from coal by the heat of an electric furnace, discovered that combination of silicon and carbon now known as carborundum, which has commercial value as an abrasive."

"I know about that," bowed Nick.

"Now, then," continued Pylotte, with an unconscious display of enthusiasm; "while diamonds certainly have been made by artificial means, the great difficulty has been that of producing them at a low cost. Moissan, in my country, produced diamonds by heating charcoal and iron to a high degree, and letting the mixture cool under enormous pressure. He succeeded in obtaining very small crystals, or diamonds, but the cost of production made his method impracticable from a commercial standpoint."

"Ah! I see."

"In 1872 a chemist named Rose converted graphite into diamonds by a similar process, but with the same result."

"The cost of production being too great?" observed Nick.

"Precisely."

"Do you think that difficulty has now been overcome?"

"I am compelled to think so, Mr. Carter," cried Pylotte, pointing to the two diamonds on the table.

"You purchased them at a price compelling that belief?"

"Exactly."

"Then you think the man of whom you got them has discovered a way to make such perfect artificial diamonds at a low price?"

"I certainly do, Mr. Carter."

"Have you any idea of the machinery and ingredients he might require?" asked Nick, with a view to getting points by which to locate the diamond plant.

Pylotte could easily inform him, and he promptly did so, following the instructions given him by Dave Kilgore.

"He would require an electric furnace and a hydraulic press," said he. "Also the tools for cutting the crude crystals. The ingredients used would depend upon the process he has discovered, probably coal or charcoal, and possibly some quantities of iron salts and sulphur."

"In brief, then, Mr. Pylotte," said Nick, pointing to the diamonds on the table, "if those stones were made as cheaply as you think, the diamond market offers the manufacturers of them a field for a most gigantic swindle, does it not?"

"Indeed it does!" exclaimed Pylotte, throwing up both hands. "Enormous! Enormous! Millions could be made by so unparalleled a fraud!"

"It opens the way, in fact, to the most colossal swindle on record?"

"Undoubtedly."

Nick glanced significantly at Chick, then abruptly rose to his feet. That he had struck the big game which from the first he had suspected, he now had not a doubt.

"I require no more of you at present, Mr. Pylotte," said he, with courteous firmness. "I shall do all in my power to remedy your loss by this swindle, and to secure the perpetrators of it."

"Thank you, Detective Carter," bowed Pylotte, with a crafty display of appreciation and humility.

"Meantime," added Nick, "you will please take no action in the case, but leave it entirely to me."

"I will do so, sir."

"If you will leave me your city address, or call here again in a few days, I shall have something to report to you."

"I will call the day after to-morrow, Detective Carter," said Pylotte, promptly, too cunning to give Nick a fictitious address.

"Very well," said Nick. "Call in the evening. And now, Mr. Pylotte, we will bid you good-morning, and get to work at once upon the case."

Pylotte bowed very agreeably, taking his artificial diamonds from the table and replacing them in his pocket; and Nick then conducted him to the door, again assuring him that no efforts in his behalf should be spared.

Pylotte once more expressed his thanks, bowing and smiling as he descended the steps, and Nick closed the door and returned to the library.

"Well, Chick, the bag is open and the cat out," he cried, as he entered.

"Right you are, Nick."

"And a monstrous cat it is!"

"Never a larger one," declared Chick, with a laugh. "By Jove! Nick, if Kilgore has really found a way to produce such perfect counterfeit diamonds, his gang could work the greatest swindle ever known, unless headed off."

"That is their game, all right," said Nick. "From the very first I have suspected something extraordinary. They are not the stamp of criminals to dicker with petty jobs."

"I should say not."

"Far from it."

"One thing is plain."

"Namely?"

"Where Cervera gets her diamonds, and of what they consist."

"True. She certainly is one of the gang."

"With such counterfeits as those worked upon Pylotte, and one big jewelry concern to help market the goods, they could clean up millions in a very short time."

"No doubt of it. And they have their jewelry concern, all right."

"Venner & Co.?"

"Surely."

"We must get absolute proof of it."

"That's just what I intend doing, now that we have the game uncovered," said Nick, grimly.

"And then proceed to locate the plant where the goods are made, eh?"

"Precisely."

"What are your plans?"

"We'll first get a line on Venner, and see to what it leads," replied Nick. "There now is a way by which we can call the turn on him, and get proof of his co-operation with Kilgore and his gang."

"By getting him to sell us some diamonds?"

"Exactly."

"And then proving them to be artificial?"

"That's the idea."

"Can you get at him in a way to trap him?"

"What do you mean?"

"He may fight shy of us," suggested Chick, "in case he knows of Pylotte's scrap with the gang last night. He may fear that Pylotte has discovered the fraud, and reported it to the police."

"There's not much danger of that," replied Nick. "So stupendous a fraud would at once be given publicity through the press."

"That's true."

"In either case," added Nick, abruptly, "there's a way by which we can fool him. I'll explain it on the way. Get your make-up box and prepare to go with me. Since we have the game uncovered, we'll lose no time in rounding up these accomplished rascals."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Chick, as he hurriedly arose. "The sooner the better."

"We may have ragged work before the job is completed," added Nick. "So provide yourself with a brace of guns. I'll be ready when you are."

"Where first?"

"To the house of Pandu Singe, the snake charmer."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

It was not quite noon when Nick Carter and Chick arrived at the house of the Hindoo snake charmer.

They found Pandu Singe at home with his interpreter, and the two detectives were very cordially received.

Nick quickly disclosed his business.

"We wish to borrow your personalities for a short time, also some of your curious garments," he explained to Pandu Singe, through his interpreter, who also was a Hindoo of superior education.

The snake charmer appeared greatly surprised at such a request, but Nick readily invented a very plausible story to serve his purpose, without disclosing the true occasion.

He soon persuaded the foreigner to grant his request, moreover, and the amazement of Pandu Singe and the interpreter were redoubled when they beheld what followed.

This was the extraordinary transformation of their visitors.

Nick had already outlined his plans to Chick, and they at once began operations.

First they placed the two Hindoos in chairs near the windows, where the light revealed every peculiarity of their swarthy features.

Nick next adjusted a large mirror upon the table, and placed his make-up box near by.

Using the interpreter for his pattern, Nick then set to work with grease paints, powders, false hair, and the like, and at the end of twenty minutes he had, with most artistic skill, converted himself into a startling likeness of his model.

The addition of the garments already provided for him made the remarkable transformation absolutely complete.

Chick had not been idle meantime, but with equally clever manipulation had made himself into a counterfeit presentment of Pandu Singe.

The astonishment of the two Hindoos, and their delight as they beheld the progressive changes so artistically made, could scarcely find expression in words.

At the end of an hour, when the two detectives stood robed in their strange Indian attire, one would readily have declared that four genuine Hindoos, rather than two, occupied the apartment.

Having thus paved the way to his next move, Nick easily prevailed upon the Hindoos to remain indoors for a day or two, lest the deception should be discovered and his designs perverted.

He and Chick then returned to their waiting carriage, and half an hour later it drew up at the Fifth Avenue store of Venner & Co.

Chick alighted and led the way in.

In order that he might do most of the talking, and shape his course by whatever might occur, Nick had decided to personate the interpreter.

Yet both detectives had carefully noticed the peculiar characteristics of the Hindoo tongue, and believed that they could imitate it so cleverly as to prevent detection.

Several facts, which Nick then had no way of knowing, however, operated very quickly to betray him and the crafty ruse he had adopted, when Venner personally met them at the store door.

First, Kilgore had shrewdly reasoned that Nick's first move, after the disclosures made by Pylotte, would be that of thus getting positive evidence against Venner; and the crafty diamond swindler had warned Venner to be on the watch for the detective, and to handle him in a way to serve their own designs.

Furthermore, when visiting the theater with Cervera, Venner frequently had heard Pandu Singe talking with his interpreter;

and before Nick fairly had begun speaking, Venner penetrated his disguise and saw that he was up against the two detectives.

Yet, despite the unexpected characters in which he now beheld them, the nerve of the polished knave did not weaken, nor his countenance in any way betray him. He at once proceeded to follow Kilgore's instructions.

"Ah! yes, I recognize both you and your interpreter," said he, in reply to Nick's dignified greeting. "I have frequently seen Pandu Singe at the theater, where I am admitted to the stage with Señora Cervera, the famous Spanish dancer. Perhaps Pandu Singe may have seen me there."

Nick gravely bowed, then pretended to interpret the remarks to Chick; who immediately began to bow and smile, at the same time glibly responding in a jargon that would have staggered a Chinese laundryman, yet which sounded as much like Hindoo as anything.

Had his own situation been less serious, and the entire outlook less desperate, Venner would have laughed at the consummate dignity and soberness with which the two detectives co-operated in their exchange of unintelligible talk.

"My employer, the great Pandu Singe," bowed Nick, "says he remembers the friend of the great Cervera."

"Ah! I am glad to hear it," cried Venner, shaking hands with Chick.

"He has seen the splendid diamonds of the great señora, and has heard that they came from your magnificent store," Nick then went on to explain.

"That is quite right," bowed Venner. "Many of them did come from here. Is Pandu Singe looking for some diamonds?"

Nick promptly bowed, and noted a gleam of satisfaction in the depths of Venner's eyes.

"The great Pandu Singe soon returns to his own country," replied Nick. "He wishes to take with him, as a gift to her august excellency, the Empress of all the Indies, six fine jewels of equal weight and value. He calls here to learn if you can provide him with them."

Venner plainly saw the game that was being attempted, and it suited him to the very letter.

"Does the great Pandu Singe wish to purchase diamonds?" he asked, bowing.

"Diamonds, yes! Are they not for the empress?"

"I should have thought of that, certainly."

"Only diamonds will answer."

"Of large size and the first water?"

"The great Pandu Singe would consider no other."

"Alas, then, this is most unfortunate!" Venner now exclaimed, glancing about the store. "You see that we are making some repairs here, in the walls of our store and vault."

"That is plain," bowed Nick. "But what has that to do with the diamonds?"

"Only this," replied Venner, with feigned regret. "During these repairs I have removed all of my most valuable diamonds to a vault in my private residence."

"For safer keeping?"

"Exactly."

"I will explain to Pandu Singe."

"Wait a moment," Venner quickly interposed. "Tell him, also, that I have at my residence the very gems he desires, six magnificent diamonds, precisely alike in weight, purity and cutting. They cannot be equaled in New York City, if in the entire country."

"Are they fit for an empress?"

"They are fit for a goddess."

"Ah! that will please Pandu Singe."

"Tell him, also, that he can purchase them at a marvelously low price," cried Venner. "Now, if Pandu Singe will come to my house, say early this evening, he may see the diamonds and examine them at his leisure. Tell him that, Mr. Interpreter, and say that I will send my carriage for him immediately after

dinner. Say, too, that he may then see the diamonds both by daylight and lamplight, and so observe all the variety of their magnificent fire. Really, this will be greatly to the advantage of Pandu Singe."

Nick gravely heard him to a finish, and with never a change of countenance.

Yet, like a flash, one of those marvelous intuitions characteristic of this great detective, Nick Carter had suddenly grasped the whole truth.

That conflict of the previous night, the flight of three of the diamond gang, Pylotte left comparatively uninjured in the road, his subsequent disclosures, his extensive knowledge of the diamond-making art, the hints he had imparted, and now this manifest eagerness of Venner to lure his ostensible customers to his suburban house—all combined to reveal to Nick's keen mind the shrewd game by which Kilgore was hoping to entrap him.

Nick now knew that Venner recognized both Chick and himself, and was serving only the Kilgore gang.

Yet Nick bowed without the slightest self-betrayal, and said, gravely:

"I will explain the situation to Pandu Singe."

For several minutes the two detectives maintained their curious game of talk.

Then Nick, who had speedily planned his own counter-move, again turned to Rufus Venner.

"The great Pandu Singe will do what you suggest," said he. "He wishes to see the diamonds, and will be pleased to come to your house."

Venner had felt sure of this to start with, though he little dreamed that Nick had guessed the truth, and knew that he was recognized.

"Let it be to-day, then," said he, quickly.

"At your own pleasure," bowed Nick.

"I will send my carriage far you at seven this evening," cried Venner, with secret exultation.

Nick gravely tendered one of the snake charmer's cards.

"The great Pandu Singe will not keep your carriage waiting!" said he, with a dryness to which Venner then was blind.

"Well, Chick, what say you to that?" demanded Nick, as they were returning to the house of the snake charmer.

Chick laughed grimly.

"I say that we are now up against it."

"Right! There's a mighty wicked crisis near at hand."

"No doubt of it, Nick. Venner knew us all right."

"But he does not suspect that we are aware that he knew us, and in that at least we have the best of him."

"We'll turn it to a good account, too."

"Do you see the game this Kilgore gang is playing?"

"Plainly, Nick."

"They aim to lure us both to Venner's house, and there trap us and do us up."

"To which latter," said Chick, dryly, "we shall strenuously object."

"Well, rather!" laughed Nick. "Still, I can see nothing in evading this question or in making a raid upon Venner's house. If the Kilgore gang are about to lay for us there, it is evident that their diamond plant is located elsewhere. They would not take chances of failing to down us, and then having their plant discovered in the house where they slipped up."

"Surely not," admitted Chick. "Kilgore is too shrewd to take those chances."

"Undoubtedly."

For several minutes Nick calmly considered the situation, then bluntly observed:

"Chick, I see but one course for us. We must go up against the game, and give this gang what rope they want."

"That's just my idea, Nick."

"In no other way can we make sure of nailing the entire gang, and also locating their plant. Raiding Venner's house would not accomplish it. Some of the gang might not be there, or possibly escape us, and we might search in vain for their plant. Then we should have most of our work to do over again."

"That's right, Nick."

"So we'll take the one sure way, Chick," said Nick, decisively. "We'll let this gang continue to think they are fooling us, and go up against them till we get the whole truth."

"That's good enough for me, Nick," nodded Chick. "I'm with you."

"It may prove to be a desperate game, but we'll take our chances. Before night I'll have laid such plans as will best serve us, and possibly circumvent these scoundrels. Here we are at the house of Pandu Singe."

Nick dismissed their carriage, and entered the dwelling, where they decided to remain until evening. Meantime Nick perfected his plans and discussed them with Chick.

Then a wire was sent to Patsy, the detective's younger assistant, with careful instructions.

Seven o'clock came, then half-past seven, but no sign of Venner's carriage.

Nick readily suspected the true reason for the delay.

"They are waiting until dark," he observed to Chick. "They don't want our arrival at Venner's house to be observed. A crafty dog, this Kilgore!"

"That he is."

"Never mind. Darkness will serve us best, as well as them."

"Hark! There's a carriage."

Nick glanced from the front window.

"A landau!" he muttered, with grim satisfaction. "Yes, and with Spotty Dalton on the seat. I know him, despite his disguise. Come on, Chick! There's rough work to be done in the next two hours."

CHAPTER XIX.

HANDS SHOWED DOWN.

Spotty Dalton stood at the door of the open carriage when Nick and Chick emerged from the house, still clad in the character of Hindoos.

"Are you sent here by Mr. Venner?" inquired Nick.

Dalton touched the cloth cap drawn low over his brow, and stroked his dark, false beard as he replied:

"Yes, sir," said he, half in his throat. "You're the interpreter, I take it."

"At your service."

"I'm a bit late, but it couldn't be helped. We'll not be long in getting there."

"Time does not matter to the great Pandu Singe," replied Nick, as he followed Chick into the open landau. "The night is still long."

"It'll be infernally long for you two meddlers," Dalton grimly said to himself, as he banged the carriage door and mounted to the box.

Then they rolled rapidly away toward a northern suburb of the city.

The dusk of evening was already deepening to darkness, a gloom more noticeable far up in the heavens than among the myriad of lights in the city streets. For not a star was visible in the murky sky, and away in the west huge banks of inky clouds were sweeping up toward the zenith, indicating the rapid approach of a sudden storm.

"Do you think it is going to rain, driver?" called Nick, from the rear seat of the carriage.

"Not soon," Dalton turned to answer; and then he added with grim significance, which he did not dream would be appreciated: "Whether it rains or not, you'll be brought back home in a closed carriage."

"It's my private opinion that the boot will be on the other leg," thought Nick, smiling faintly at the scoundrel's grim levity.

For Dalton had implied that Nick would be brought back in a hearse.

From that time but few words were spoken during the ride, though the detectives occasionally passed a remark in their meaningless lingo, merely to keep up appearances.

At eight o'clock they had left the throbbing body of the city behind them, and at half-past eight they were speeding along the deserted suburban road leading to Venner's rather isolated homestead.

Only the yellow glare of an incandescent lamp here and there now relieved the terrestrial gloom, but across the distant heavens intermittent flashes of light, followed by the low, sullen roll of thunder, told of the approaching storm.

Soon the lighted windows of Venner's house came into view through the woodland, and Nick now murmured softly to Chick:

"If I fail to rejoin you in ten minutes, you will know what to do."

"You bet!" whispered Chick. "Trust me to do it, too!"

"Here we are, sirs," cried Dalton, as he pulled up at the gate of the gravel walk. "You can go right in, while I wait to look after my horses."

Chick—as Pandu Singe—pretended to give Nick a brief command, and Nick alone sprang out upon the sidewalk.

"Wait here, driver," said he, curtly. "I will return for Pandu Singe in a few minutes."

Dalton instantly became suspicious.

"What's that for?" he abruptly demanded. "Why doesn't his nibs go in with you now?"

"It is for me to obey the great Pandu Singe, not question his commands," replied Nick, with an air of offended dignity. "I shall return for him when I have followed his instructions."

"Hold on a bit! I want to know—"

But Nick had already turned, and was striding up the long gravel walk leading to the front door of the house.

Dalton then swung round and began to address Chick, who quickly signified that he could not understand; whereupon the puzzled scoundrel remained doubtfully on the box, growling under his breath, and quite at a loss just what he should do.

Chick was now counting the seconds and minutes, until he should arrive at ten.

Venner, who was waiting with the gang in the house, heard Nick's step on the wooden veranda, and he hastened to admit him.

"What's this!" he at once exclaimed, starting. "Where is your master? You did not come here alone!"

"No, not alone," replied Nick, entering the hall. "Pandu Singe waits in the carriage."

"Waits in the carriage! For what?"

"He fears the storm may break."

"Fears the storm!" exclaimed Venner, with a blaze of suspicion leaping up in his dark eyes. "Surely, then, he will not remain out there."

"You don't understand," coolly answered Nick, quickly sizing up everything in view.

"Don't understand?"

"Pandu Singe thinks of returning home before the storm shall break. He has first sent me in to see the diamonds, as I know just what he wants. If I think well of them, I am to return to the carriage and bring him in to see them."

"Oh, that's it, eh?" cried Venner, with unabated misgivings.

"Am I to see the stones?" demanded Nick. "Pandu Singe will not care to wait long."

"Yes, yes," replied Venner, as perplexed as Dalton by Nick's unexpected move. "Come out this way, where I have them ready to show you."

Nick bowed and followed him through the hall, and a glance into the two front rooms, both of which were well lighted, told him they were vacant.

Nick knew that he was entering a trap, however, and possibly carried his life in his hand. Yet he had several shrewd designs in the plan of operations adopted.

He aimed to prevent both Chick and himself being cornered, and possibly caught at the same time. Not wishing to evade this gang, and thus reveal his own knowledge and suspicions, he designed to leave Chick free to act in case of his own downfall.

Nick knew that he alone could force Venner and the gang to show their hands, even if it resulted in his own capture. He rather invited the latter, in fact, for he knew that the gang would see the need of instantly removing him from Venner's house, at least until they could lay hands upon Chick. In this case Nick believed that they might be compelled to confine him at their diamond plant, the location of which he thus hoped to discover.

For these reasons Nick was coolly taking very long chances, at the same time leaving Chick free to quickly get in his work, in case he himself went down at the outset.

Yet there was not a sign of any person save Venner, as Nick followed him through the hall and into a side room near the rear of the house, evidently a dining room.

Nick sized it up with a glance. Electric chandelier; two doors, one by which he had entered from the hall, and the other leading into a dark kitchen; two windows, with the curtains closely drawn; several chairs, a handsome sideboard, and in the middle of the room a large, square table, covered with a rich damask cloth hanging nearly to the floor.

Upon the table was also spread a piece of black velvet, on which was displayed nearly a score of blazing diamonds—the most magnificent artificial stones ever born of man's restless genius.

Nick rightly guessed their true character, yet he allowed an ejaculation of admiration to escape him.

"Ah! Magnificent!"

"Look them over," cried Venner, with a swift scrutiny of Nick's swarthy features. "You'll excuse me for a minute or two. I wish to make sure that my rear windows and doors are locked. Such gems are a terrible temptation to thieves."

"True, sir," bowed Nick. "Take your time. Meanwhile I'll examine the diamonds. They are splendid! magnificent!"

Nick rightly guessed that Venner wished to consult some of the gang. He saw that his entering the house without Chick had thrown their plans badly out of gear, as he had designed for it to do.

Venner went into the dark kitchen, rattled a doorknob merely for a bluff, then crossed the hall and entered the library, closing the door behind him.

The room was but dimly lighted, and on the floor stood Dave Kilgore and Matthew Stall, each with a drawn revolver.

"What's the meaning of this, Rufe?" Kilgore instantly demanded, in passionate whispers.

"How do I know?" Venner hurriedly rejoined, scarce above his breath. "You heard what he said?"

"Yes, curse him, but I don't swallow it."

"Nor I."

"I can't see into his game."

"That's just my trouble," cried Venner. "Can he have discovered that we recognize him?"

"Impossible! Pylotte is too cunning to have betrayed us in any way."

This was very true, in fact; but Venner himself had blindly done the betraying.

"It doesn't matter, Rufe," Kilgore fiercely added. "We must get them both."

"That's my idea."

"And it's all the easier to get them one at a time."

"Right you are, Dave."

"Has he discovered Pylotte?"

"Surely not!"

"Go back there, then," hissed Kilgore. "Learn what his game is, if you can. Force him to show his hand."

"Leave that to me."

"Waste no time, however, and on no pretext let him leave the house to return to the carriage."

"Not on our lives."

"A warning whistle will start Pylotte, and we'll be on hand to do our part," added Kilgore, hurriedly. "Go back at once, and waste not a moment in getting at his game."

"Trust me, Dave."

"We must land Nick Carter and get him away from here before that running mate of his can make any move against us."

"That's the stuff."

"And then we'll plan to get the other. Away with you!"

These forcible measures were precisely what Nick had felt sure would be adopted by the gang, and were the very steps to which he had so shrewdly planned to force them.

Venner darted softly across the hall and returned to the dining room.

Nick was still examining the diamonds.

He stood near the table, at a point midway between the two open doors. He had selected this position for a very good reason. He was inviting capture and removal, which he knew must be preceded by an assault; and he therefore laid himself open from either side, aiming to be put down and out with as little violence as possible.

He wanted all his resources for what he knew was very likely to follow.

Nick was quite as anxious as the gang to force matters, moreover; for at the end of ten minutes, in case he did not return to the carriage, Chick was to begin getting in his work.

Therefore the climax came quickly.

Six minutes had already passed.

"Well, sir, what do you think of them?" cried Venner, as he returned to the room.

"The diamonds?" queried Nick, tossing several of them back upon the table.

"Certainly. What else?"

"They are all right, Mr. Venner."

"I thought you would say so."

"Yes, indeed. They are all right—for what they are!"

"For what they are?"

"Precisely."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean."

"I do?" snarled Venner, inquiringly, with his frowning eyes shrinking from Nick's steadfast gaze.

"Certainly you do," declared Nick. "These diamonds are imitations, not natural stones. They are the most perfect and marvelous artificial diamonds ever made.

"Artificial!" cried Venner, now drawing back. "You are mad, sir! Why, man, you are away off the track!"

"Oh, no, I'm not."

"You are!"

"Not off the track at all, but very squarely on it," Nick now retorted, speaking in his own sternly resonant tones. "Hark you, Venner, I am the one to ask the meaning of this, not you!"

Venner's hand went stealing toward his hip pocket.

"So you are showing your true colors, are you?" he cried, with threatening significance. "By Heaven, you are no Hindoo!"

"That's right, Venner, I am not," said Nick, quickly throwing off the loose robe that hid his own apparel, fearing it might impede his movements. "I am no Hindoo, but am—"

"Nick Carter!"

"Exactly!"

"So this is your game, is it?" Venner fiercely began. "If you think—"

"Stop right there, Venner," Nick sternly commanded. "Speaking of games, I am here to discover what sort of a rascally game you and this Kilgore gang are playing. I have learned enough to show me that you are a knave and a—"

"By heavens, Carter—"

"Stop!" thundered Nick. "Don't pull a gun! If you do, I'll end your—"

But he got no further, for there the climax came.

A single sharp whistle sounded from the kitchen.

Instantly Nick felt a rope noose jerked taut around his ankles, nearly throwing him from his feet.

From beneath the table, the hanging cover of which had effectually concealed him, Jean Pylotte had managed to adjust the noose upon the floor about Nick's legs. At the signal given him, he had quickly drawn it taut.

At the same moment Kilgore and Matt Stall leaped upon Nick from the kitchen and hall doors, bearing him heavily to the floor, while Venner ran to clap a revolver to the detective's head.

"Hang to his feet, Pylotte," cried Kilgore, fiercely.

"I've got 'em fast," shouted the diamond maker, from under the table.

"Quit, Carter, or I'll blow your brains out," commanded Venner, with his pistol at Nick's head.

Nick had been making a great bluff at putting up an ugly fight, but now he very agreeably subsided.

The affair was going precisely as he desired, yet for the sake of appearances he angrily snarled:

"Let up, you dogs! So this is your game, is it? Turn that gun another way, Venner, you miscreant! It might go off, and I'm not fool enough to invite its contents. This dirty game that you've played—"

"Dry up!" Kilgore sharply interrupted, while he and Stall quickly secured Nick's arms with a rope. "You'll not live to know the game that we have played, Nick Carter."

"Won't I?"

"Not if I live!" cried Kilgore, with vicious significance.

"Well, maybe you'll not live long," retorted Nick.

"I'll close that saucy trap of yours, at all events," sneered Kilgore. "Give me that gag, Matt—quick."

Nick no longer resisted. A glance at the clock on the mantel told him that nearly ten minutes had passed since he left Chick. He suffered himself to be gagged, then raised to his feet, from which Pylotte now cast the line and emerged from under the table.

Nick bestowed one look upon him, from which the rascal shrank and shuddered.

Kilgore now turned quickly to Venner, and hurriedly cried:

"You remain here, Rufe, and leave us to dispose of this fellow. We'll run him over yonder, and return as quickly as possible. It's not safe to keep him here until we have landed his running mate."

"But—"

"Don't stop for buts!" cried Kilgore, fiercely. "Go see if you can sight Chick Carter. If he is still in the carriage, we are all right up to now. In six or eight minutes go down there and

give him to understand that his interpreter wants him to come in here. Before you reach this room with him, we three will be back to help you turn him down. Do you understand?"

"Sure!" cried Venner, thrusting his weapon back in his pocket. "He cannot suspect that we have recognized Nick, and he'll come in, all right."

"Go, then! We'll be back here in six minutes."

Venner hastened to one of the front windows of the house and peered out toward the street. At that moment a flash of lightning, followed by the nearer roll of thunder, dispelled for an instant the intense gloom of the night.

A growl of profound satisfaction broke from Venner while he gazed, and he muttered exultingly:

"By Heaven! we're all right! He's waiting in the carriage, and Dalton is still on the box!"

Nick was being pushed out of a back door of the house, meantime, and then across the lawn and through the dark stable.

The ruffians who were hurrying him away did not stop there, however. Pylotte ran on ahead, while Kilgore and Matt Stall continued urging the detective across the grounds, making toward the old wooden mansion in which their secret plant was located.

It seemed to them the safest place in which to confine Nick, pending the delay in getting hands upon Chick.

Presently they came to a dry ditch, walled at each side, and originally built for draining the low meadows between the two estates. Into this they plunged, following it until they arrived near a wooden bulkhead in the foundation wall of the house. This was the secret way of entering, to which Cervera had referred the previous night.

Pylotte already had opened it, and Nick was quickly forced through a dark cellar.

"All right," cried Kilgore. "Let us in."

Instantly the secret stone door was thrown open, and Nick was nearly blinded by the flood of light in the room into which he was abruptly thrust.

He stood in the subterranean chamber of the diamond plant.

And there, erect on the floor, with her evil countenance a picture of malicious triumph, stood his crafty combatant of the previous night—Sanetta Cervera.

"*Caramba!*" she cried, shrilly, with a vicious laugh. "So you've got him! Well done, Dave! Well done!"

"Yes, and we'll presently have the other," cried Kilgore, panting hard after his exertions.

"Good for you, Dave," screamed Cervera, exultingly. "But this is the one I want most—this is the one!"

"Look lively, Matt. Lend a hand here, and we'll bind him to yonder chair."

"And leave Cervera to guard him, eh?"

"That's the stuff."

"Can she do it?"

"Can she!" growled Kilgore, with derisive vehemence. "You let her alone for that."

"Yes, yes, let me alone for that!"

"We must get back to stand by Venner. That Chick Carter is nearly as tough a customer as this fellow."

"I guess you'll find that that's no dream," said Nick to himself, as the ruffians bound him to the chair mentioned.

Cervera was laughing and capering around as if about to have a fit—yet her laugh had a terrible and chilling ring.

"Oh, yes, I'll guard him, Dave," she shrilly cried, with a frightful menace in her strained voice. "*Caramba*, yes! let me alone for that."

"So I do," snarled Kilgore.

"Knot the line fast, Matt—make sure of that," the woman fiercely added. "Yes, I'll keep him quiet—never doubt that, boys! He shall be like a baby taking milk. Perdition! but you shall have a sweet time, Mr. Nick, alone here with Sanetta Cervera!"

Kilgore paid but little attention to any of this, and only now and then bestowed a glance upon the vicious woman.

Within a minute after their arrival at the plant, the gang had Nick securely bound to a common wooden chair, when they condescended to remove the gag from his mouth.

"He may shout himself hoarse here, if he likes," growled Kilgore. "There will be none to hear him."

Then he hurried Pylotte and Matt Stall back to the Venner house, to land Chick Carter.

Left alone with Nick, Cervera darted to the stone door in the solid wall, and secured it within.

There was murder in her glittering eyes when she shot the heavy bolts into their iron sockets.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BOOT ON THE OTHER LEG.

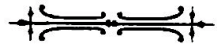
In the heat of action and excitement ten minutes are as nothing.

The time seems longer, however, when one sits waiting in a motionless carriage, enveloped in the gloom of night, with grim distrust and uncertainty acting like spurs in the sides of one's impatience.

Before five minutes had fairly passed, after Nick's departure, Spotty Dalton had suffered his misgivings to the very limit of his endurance.

Chick sat mentally counting the passing seconds, then scoring each departed minute with his fingers, of which he had exhausted four and a thumb, the entire complement of one hand; and all the while his eyes were riveted with intense vigilance upon the growling ruffian on the seat above him.

Had Dalton ventured so much as a move to leave his perch, Chick would have been after him like a terrier after a rat.



At the end of five minutes, however, Dalton made a preliminary move. He hitched the reins around the whipstock, then stared for a second or two toward Venner's house, fifty yards away through the surrounding park.

Then he suddenly swung round on his seat, and growled ferociously at Chick, at the same time signifying with gestures the communication he imagined would not be verbally understood:

"See here, you swarthy-faced snake fiend, I'm bound up yonder, to see what's going on! You sit where you are, d'ye hear, and I'll be back in a jiffy, if things are all right! If they're not, —— you, I'll be back just the same—with a gun!"

As if moved by a wish to understand him, Chick arose in the body of the carriage while Dalton was thus declaring himself. He heard and understood, all right, and it necessitated his getting in his work a little earlier than was planned. For Chick would take no such chances as this that Nick's operations in the house would be interfered with.

As the last word left Dalton's lips, the arm of the detective shot out through the darkness, and closed with the grip of a vise around the ruffian's neck, throttling him to silence.

"With a gun, eh?" Chick fiercely muttered, yanking Dalton backward into the body of the carriage. "You open your lips again for so much as a whisper, and I'll close them with six inches of cold steel."

In the glare of a distant lightning flash, Dalton, though struggling furiously, caught the gleam of a polished blade at

his throat, and a glimpse of the flaming eyes in the face above him.

He shrank, gasping for breath, as the truth dawned upon him; and then the voice of another sounded close beside the open carriage.

"Want any help, Chick?"

Nick's youthful assistant, to whom a wire had been sent from the house of the snake charmer, had appeared like an apparition out of the roadside gloom.

"Ah! you're here, Patsy!" muttered Chick. "Yes. Clap a gag into this cur's mouth. We'll choke off his pipes first of all."

Dalton uttered a vicious growl, then felt the point of the knife pierce the skin at his throat, and he wisely relapsed into silence.

For Patsy to fish out a gag, and bind it securely in the scoundrel's mouth, was the work of a few moments only.

Then Chick jerked Dalton up from the rear cushion and out into the road, in far less time than is taken to record it.

"Off with his coat and hat, Patsy," he hurriedly commanded. "Now the false beard, my lad. Now get into them yourself, as quickly as you can."

"I'm all in, Chick," chuckled Patsy, working like a trooper.

"Got all the traps with you?"

"Sure!"

"Clap the bracelets on him, then. Now give me a second pair, and a strip of line. That's the stuff."

"Oh, I brought the whole shooting match," laughed Patsy.

"Good for you! Now mount to the box, and leave this dog to me. I'll return in half a minute."

Patsy climbed up to the seat from which Dalton had been so speedily snatched and overcome, and Chick now ran the rascal a rod or more into the woodland on the opposite side of the road.

There he threw him to the ground beside a small oak, around the trunk of which he quickly twined Dalton's legs, and then fastened them at the ankles with a pair of irons.

"I reckon you'll stay there quietly until I want you, barring that you pull up the tree," he grimly remarked, as he turned to hasten back to the carriage, in which he quickly resumed his seat.

A moment later Venner peered from the distant window—and was satisfied with what he saw.

Five minutes later he came striding down the walk and approached the carriage. Without a word to the driver, whom he supposed to be Dalton, he opened the carriage door and laid his hand on Chick's arm, at the same time pointing toward the house.

Chick signified that he understood, and held out both hands, as if he wished to be helped to the sidewalk.

Venner promptly raised both of his—only to suddenly hear a quick, metallic snap, and feel links of cold steel confining his wrists. Their icy chill went through him like a knife, and he reeled as if stricken a blow.

"Good God!" he gasped, hoarsely. "What's this?"

Chick and Patsy were already beside him.

"This," said Chick, sternly, "is your wind-up!"

"My—"

"Stop! Not a loud word, Mr. Venner, or worse will be yours! Now tell me in whispers—where is Nick Carter?"

The sight of a revolver thrust under his nose had a potent effect upon the dismayed man, yet even while he saw that he was cornered, he seized upon the hope that Kilgore and the gang might discover and release him.

"Find him yourself, if you want him!" he hissed through his teeth, with an ugly frown. "I'm cursed if I'll inform you!"

Chick did not delay for arguments or persuasion. With Patsy's help he speedily put Venner in the same helpless condition in which he had left Dalton, stretched upon the ground, within a rod of one another.

Then he threw off his disguise, and shifted his revolvers to his side pockets.

"Now for yonder house, Patsy, and to see what the remainder of this gang are at," said he. "Come with me, and have your guns ready."

"I'm with you," cried Patsy, coolly. "Guns and all."

A dash up the gravel walk brought them to the front door, which Venner had left partly open.

There they paused and listened.

Not a sound came from within the house; but overhead the tempest now was breaking, with frequent crashing peals of thunder, and flashes of lightning that illumined all the landscape. Rain, too, now began pelting down on the veranda roof.

"We'll steal in and see what we can find," whispered Chick, drawing one of his revolvers.

"Go it, then."

He led the way, and Patsy followed. The silence in the house mystified them at first. It appeared to have been entirely deserted.

When they reached the door of the dining room, however, Chick discovered on the floor the disguise which Nick had discarded.

"I have it, Patsy," he cried, softly. "They have nailed Nick, just as he expected, and have taken him somewhere to confine him."

"Perhaps in the cellar," suggested Patsy.

"I hardly think so, yet we'll have a look."

Moving as quietly as shadows, they entered the kitchen and easily located the cellar door. It was closed and locked, with the key remaining.

"Evidently they're not down there," whispered Chick.

"Let's try the upper floors," suggested Patsy. "They may be laying for us up there, but I reckon we're good for them."

"We'll take the chance, surely. Come on."

They crept through the hall again, and then mounted the broad stairway, which led to the next floor.

There the utter silence and the semidarkness quickly convinced them that they were on the wrong track.

"The stable," muttered Chick, suddenly. "We'll try the stable."

"They certainly have vamosed this ranch," remarked Patsy.

"Plainly. Come on, then, and we'll try the stable."

Together they started downstairs.

A moment later Kilgore, Pylotte and Matt Stall came flurrying into the house by the rear door.

In the bright light of the broad hall each party discovered the other at precisely the same moment, and Kilgore instantly guessed the truth.

With a cry of rage, he whipped out his revolver and fired point-blank at the two men on the stairs.

"Down 'em, boys!" he yelled furiously. "Down 'em, or our game is done for!"

His bullet glanced from the baluster rail near Chick, and buried itself in the wall behind him.

"Drop them, Patsy!" he shouted, instantly. "Shoot to kill! It's them or us!"

"Let her go, Gallagher!" roared Patsy, pulling both guns.

Then, amid the tumult of the breaking tempest outside, there began a fusillade the thunder of which rivaled that of the night, and which, though comparatively brief, was as fast and furious as any man there had ever experienced.

Pylotte went down at the first shot from Chick, however, with a bullet in his brain.

Then shot followed shot with lightning rapidity.

Both detectives sprang down several stairs to evade the rain of lead, for both Kilgore and Stall were rapidly emptying two revolvers.

A bullet singed Patsy's ear.

Another dislodged Chick's hat.

Then Kilgore reeled with a slight wound in his left arm.

A score of shots were fired and wasted, meantime, for all hands were dodging about the hall and stairs in an utterly indescribable fashion.

It was the warmest kind of a fight for fully three minutes.

Then Chick got a line on Matt Stall from behind the baluster post, and dropped him with a ragged wound in his hip.

Stall fell with a yell of rage and pain, and Kilgore found himself alone, and against odds.

He turned like a flash, and darted out of the rear door of the house.

He knew that the game was up, his confederates done for, and his own chances of escape but small; and the situation stirred to their very depths the worst elements of this lifelong criminal.

But one thought possessed him—that of revenge, that of destroying the chief cause of his downfall—Nick Carter.

With this end in view, Kilgore tore like a madman through the blinding rain of that tempestuous night, and shaped his course back to the diamond plant.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ONLY RESOURCE.

Despite the corner in which he had placed himself, a situation far more desperate than he at first imagined, Nick Carter was congratulating himself upon the success of his ruse by which he had so quickly located the secret plant of the diamond swindlers, even at the sacrifice of his personal freedom.

The fact that he now sat bound in a chair in the hidden stronghold of the gang, watched only by Cervera, did not seriously disturb the fearless detective.

Nick had been in many a worse corner than this, or in corners believed to be worse, and he felt confident of pulling out of the scrape with a whole skin, and with most of the gang in custody.

He had surveyed his surroundings with more than cursory interest, therefore, while Kilgore and his confederates were binding his arms to the rounds of the chair back, and his ankles to the legs of the same.

The rough foundation walls of the house, the massive stone wall built across the cellar to mask the secret chamber, the elaborate electric furnace, the huge hydraulic press, the workbench and tools, the powerful arc light pendent from the ceiling—half an eye would have convinced Nick that he occupied the workroom of that master craftsman whose chemical knowledge and inventive genius had given birth to a most marvelous production, long, earnestly, yet vainly, sought by others—

The production of an artificial diamond!

Not until Nick heard the stone door forcibly closed, and its iron bolts shot violently into their sockets, did he pay serious attention to Cervera, the venomous Spanish vixen left to guard him.

Then, as she swung round toward him, he took a sharper look at her darkly magnificent face, and was thrilled despite him by the extraordinary changes it had undergone.

It had lost its beauty. Its olive flush had given place to a chalky whiteness. The radiance of her eyes had become a merciless glitter, like the glint cast from the eyes of a serpent. The reflection of a consuming passion for vengeance had transfigured her countenance, till it had become like the face of a fiend.

Though Nick saw at a glance that his situation had taken on an unexpected and desperate phase, he suppressed any betrayal of it. He met the woman eye to eye, while she briefly paused and faced him, with a cruel smile curling her gray lips.

"So I have you now, Nick Carter," she cried, with mocking significance.

"Well, yes, in a way," admitted Nick, coolly.

"I have you in my power," hissed Cervera, with a vicious display of satisfaction.

"Ah! that's different," said Nick.

"How different?"

"That you have me in your power remains to be demonstrated."

"Are we not alone here, you fool?"

"Yes, very much alone."

"And you helpless?"

"Apparently."

"If I wish, Nick Carter, I can kill you."

"Then pray don't wish it," said Nick. "I am still too young to be heartlessly slain, even by so beautiful and accomplished a woman."

"*Caramba!* you mock me!" cried Cervera, darting toward him with eyes ablaze and her lithe figure quivering with passion. "You mock me!—you shall repent it! Perdition! you shall repent it!"

"Is that so?"

"You shall repent it, I say!"

"In this world, or in the next?" inquired Nick, bent upon prolonging the scene as much as possible, with a hope that Chick might suddenly turn up.

Cervera did not answer him immediately. She wheeled again and darted to the door, once more to make sure that she had secured its bolts.

She was clad in the black dress in which she had escaped from Nick the previous night, the somber hue of which was relieved only by occasional flashes of her dainty white lace underskirts, as she swept quickly from place to place, with her lithe figure crouching at times, and her every movement as swift and impulsive as that of a startled leopard.

As he sat watching her, Nick was reminded of her matchless work upon the stage, thrilling men and women alike with her wild grace and the fiery passion of her indescribable dances.

She returned to confront him after a moment, crouching before him, with her glowing eyes fixed on his.

"In the next world—not in this!" she now replied, with a voice that cut the air like the snap of a whip. "You'd have brief time for repentance in this."

"So you've decided to do the job, have you?" Nick coolly demanded.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear it."

"Here is where we even up accounts."

"Even them up, eh?"

"You heard what I said."

"But I wasn't aware that I have so very much the best of you."

"You have."

"How so?"

"*Caramba!* you know too much!"

"Ah! you mean about that girl."

"Yes."

"I see," nodded Nick, secretly working in vain to loose the ropes confining his arms. "Well, señora, as a matter of fact, I am rather likely to make things unpleasant for you one of these days."

"It will be this day, or never. You'll not live to see another."

"Possibly not."

"*Caramba!* do you doubt it?"

She darted nearer to him, with her hand tearing open the waist of her dress, and then the gleam of a poniard met Nick's gaze.

She swept it before his eyes with a wild gesture, and gave vent to a mocking laugh.

"Do you doubt that I can slay you?"

"Not at all," answered Nick. "It's very evident."

"Or that I will?"

"That appears equally manifest."

"So it is!" hissed Cervera, with vicious intensity. "I intend to do it! Do you hear, Nick Carter? I intend to do it!"

"Oh, yes, I hear you."

"Why don't you shrink? Why don't you plead for mercy?"

"What's the use?"

She answered him with a laugh that made the room ring.

"Besides," added Nick, "it's not my style to show the white feather."

"We'll see! *Caramba!* we will see!"

She came nearer to him, crouching before him, so near that her breath fell hot upon his cheeks. Then, with a quick movement, she pressed the point of the blade through his clothing, till it pricked the flesh above his heart.

With his arms bound, with his ankles secured to the legs of the chair, Nick appeared utterly at her mercy—of which she had none.

Despite himself, Nick shrank slightly from the wound, and for the first time shuddered at the peril by which he was menaced, and from which there seemed to be no avenue of escape.

Cervera laughed again, a laugh freighted with the terrible ring of madness.

"Did it hurt you?" she screamed, with her glittering eyes raised to search his. "Perdition! I hope so! You have tortured me with a thousand fears. I'd like to repay you with a thousand pangs!"

Nick's eyes took on an ugly gleam.

"Why don't you do so, then?" he growled.

"I would, if I had the time," cried Cervera, through her teeth.

"You have all there is."

"Ten thousand times I'd thrust it into you—thus! thus!"

Nick set his jaws and met the blade without flinching.

Twice the vicious demon thrust it through his clothing, and now two crimson stains of blood on his shirt front followed the withdrawal of the weapon.

"See! see!" screamed Cervera, triumphantly, with her terrible face upturned to his gaze. "You're beginning to bleed! Did you know that the sight of blood affects me as it does a leopard? I thirst for more—if that of one I hate! When next I strike you, I shall strike deeper!"

That she fully intended to murder him, Nick now, had not a doubt. The homicidal madness was in her eyes, in her every feature, her every motion, and it rang in every word that fell from her bloodless lips.

Yet the inflexible nerve of the detective did not for a moment desert him.

"Send the blade home at once, if you like," he said, with a scornful frown.

"Not yet—not yet!" she cried, shrilly. "There'll be time for that."

"Time and to spare," sneered Nick.

"I first wish to torture you, as you've tortured me!"

"Go ahead, then."

"Once more! Are you ready?"

"Let it come."

Again she drew back the glittering blade, only to mock him with several pretended thrusts, hoping thus to create and prolong an agony of fear and suspense.

A more viciously cruel and vindictive creature never drew the breath of life.

She laughed again, and slowly pressed the weapon closer—and then, with a sudden startled cry, she drew back and leaped to her feet.

A noise like that of a mighty cannonade seemed to shake even the solid walls of this buried chamber.

It was the crash of thunder in the heavens overhead.

It was Cervera's first intimation of the terrible tempest that had been gathering outside.

At first she thought the sound was that of revolvers, and she darted to the door and listened, pressing her ear to the wall.

The instant her back was turned, Nick made a desperate attempt to free himself, straining cords and muscles under the determined effort. It proved vain, however. The ropes held him as if made of twisted steel.

Yet in his brief but desperate struggle his right arm came in contact with an object in the side pocket of his sack coat.

The object was a box nearly filled with parlor matches—one of the most dangerous and treacherous creations of man's inventive genius.

Like a sudden revelation, or a bolt out of the blue, there leaped up in Nick's mind a possible way of escape.

He thought of Cervera's garments, of the fluffy lace skirts beneath her gown, to which a single flash of fire would instantly prove fatal.

The resort to such means seemed horrible—yet Nick well knew it was the one and only resource left him.

He glanced sharply at Cervera. She was still listening at the door, with her evil face a picture of intense suspense.

With a quick turn of his wrist, Nick succeeded in extracting the box from his pocket. Then he forced it open, and with a move of his hand he scattered its entire contents over the floor around his chair. The tiny matches fell with scarce a sound, and Cervera, ten feet away, failed to hear them.

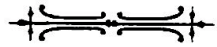
Then Nick quietly worked his chair back a foot or two, in order to bring some of the fateful things upon the floor directly in front of him.

A moment later Cervera turned from the door.

"Thunder—it was thunder," she muttered, under her breath. "There's a storm outside."

"Somebody coming?" queried Nick, with taunting accents.

He now aimed to provoke her, to force the situation to a climax, lest any mischance should have befallen Chick, or perverted in any way his own designs upon Kilgore and the gang. His taunting remark proved effective, moreover.



With a snarl of rage Cervera darted toward him, with eyes for him alone, never for the floor.

"You dog!" she cried, through her white teeth.

"Do you mock me again?"

"Oh! no, of course not," sneered Nick.

"You lie! You do! You think some one will come—that you will then escape me," screamed Cervera, quivering through and through with venomous passion.

Nick watched her as a cat watches a mouse.

Her face was ghastly and distorted, her breast heaving, her every nerve quivering, and her eyes were like balls of fire under their knitted brows.

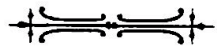
Still clutching the poniard, her jeweled fingers worked convulsively around its haft, like those of one who fain would strike a death blow, yet whose hand was briefly held by consuming horror.

Suddenly she darted nearer, with a vicious snarl.

"You think you'll escape me," she screamed, with bitter ferocity. "It shows in your eyes. I'll make sure that you don't. Let come who may, you shall be found—dead! Dead!—do you hear?"

"Oh! yes, I hear."

"Yet you do not fear? We'll see—we'll see!"



She darted closer to him, with the weapon raised, above her head, and her knee touched Nick's knee. He swung quickly around toward her, and scraped his feet over the floor below her skirts.

Then came a quick, furious snapping, like the noise of a miniature fusillade. A score of the matches had been ignited by Nick's swift move.

Almost instantly a shriek of terror broke from Cervera's lips, and she reeled back, clutching wildly at her skirts.

"My God! I'm on fire!—on fire!" she screamed, with a voice so intense in its agony as to have chilled a man of stone.

A roar came from Nick as he sighted the flames under her gown.

"Release me! Release me!" he thundered, furiously, with a voice that drowned her frightful screams. "Cut me loose—loose! It's your only hope—your only hope!"

She heard him like one in a nightmare of agony and terror, and her instinct rather than her reason responded to his thundering commands.

Still with the poniard in her jeweled hand, still shrieking wildly, she leaped to his side, and with a single sweep of the keen weapon severed the rope binding his arms.

Then Nick snatched the poniard from her hand. With several swift cuts and slashes he released his limbs, and sprang quickly to his feet.

He had already shaped his course. He had observed on the sulphur barrels, near the wall, a strip of matting, used as a cover for them. Nick snatched it from the barrels, and rushed to wrap it around the skirts and limbs of the terror-stricken woman.

For several moments the result seemed doubtful, so doubtful that Nick finally threw Cervera heavily to the floor, the better to press the matting closely around her and so smother the flames. In this he presently succeeded, but not before she was so severely burned as to be rendered utterly helpless.

When Nick arose to his feet Cervera remained lying prostrate on the floor, moaning with pain, yet in a state of semi-consciousness only. A glance told Nick that she could make no move to escape, and he now had other work than that of looking to her comfort.

He ran to the stone door, threw the bolts, and quickly dragged it open.

Even as he did so, from out of the gloom of the adjoining cellar, a man came into view, as if suddenly arisen from the ground.

The man was Dave Kilgore.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST TRICK.

"Carter!"

"Kilgore!"

Each man uttered the name of the other, as if with the same breath. The meeting came so suddenly that, for the bare fraction of a second, both men were nonplused.

Then both whipped out a weapon.

Crack!

Bang!

They fired together, and both missed, Nick's usually accurate aim being spoiled by the gloom of the cellar.

Kilgore instantly sprang further away in the darkness, and aimed again.

The hammer of his weapon fell as usual, but there was no report. In his recent fight at the Venner house he had emptied

both of his revolvers, save the one bullet that had just missed Nick Carter.

Then Kilgore, failing to have found Nick at his mercy, thought only of making his own escape. He turned and ran toward the open door by which he had entered.

At that moment Chick's ringing voice sounded from outside.

"This way! this way, Patsy!" he cried, louder than the rolling thunder overhead. "I've found the rat hole!"

"I'm with you," yelled Patsy.

They were already at the door.

By the frequent flashes of lightning they had, after the fight at Venner's, succeeded in following Kilgore across the meadows, and they well knew that he was headed to get even with Nick.

Now Nick's voice rang through the cellar.

"Look out for him, Chick," he commanded. "He's coming that way. Look out for his gun."

"Hurrah!" roared Chick, the moment he heard Nick's voice. "Let him come, gun and all!"

Kilgore saw his flight cut off in that direction, but he knew every inch of the house. He turned like a rat in the darkness, and made for the stairs leading to the floor above. Up these he hurriedly scrambled.

Nick heard him through the gloom, and followed him, pitching headlong at the foot of the stairs just as Kilgore opened the door leading to the hall above.

There the dim rays from a hall lamp revealed the man for an instant, and showed Nick the way. He was up again and after Kilgore like a hound after a fox.

Kilgore dashed through the hall, but dared not take time to unlock and open the front door of the house. He had a profound respect for the revolver in the hand of his pursuer, who already had reached the hall.

It was a flight for life, and Kilgore knew it.

He turned like a flash and darted up the stairs, making for the second floor. Three at a stride he covered, and succeeded in reaching the corridor above before Nick could get a line on him.

Nick followed, gun in hand.

On the second floor Kilgore darted into a dark chamber, and then through that to one adjoining it, where he waited till he heard Nick plunging into the one first mentioned.

Then Kilgore slipped out into the hall again, hoping to retrace his steps downstairs and escape by the front door.

In the way of that, however, Chick and Patsy were now in the lower hall, the former shouting lustily up the stairs:

"Run him down, Nick! Run him down! We'll cover this way of escape!"

An involuntary oath broke from Kilgore's lips, and at the same moment a vivid flash of lightning from the inky heavens illumined all the house.

From the chamber in which he stood, Nick again caught sight of his man, and was after him in an instant.

Kilgore heard him coming, and again fled through the hall and up another flight of stairs.

"You'd better throw up your hands," roared Nick, as he followed.

The answer came back with a yell of defiance:

"Not on your life!"

"You're a lost dog," cried Nick, hoping to keep him replying.

"You'll not get me alive!"

"Then I'll get you dead!" cried Nick, as he mounted the stairs.

"You haven't got me yet!"

"Next door to it, my man."

This brought no answer.

In a moment Nick reached the second hall, where he briefly paused to listen. Save the rain beating on the roof of the

house, only one sound reached his strained ears. It was like that of some one hammering against the side of the house with some heavy object. For a moment the detective was puzzled. He could not fathom the meaning of such a sound.

Then a gust of damp night air rushed through the hall and swept Nick's cheek.

"Ah! an open window!" he muttered. "That's easily located."

He groped his way into one of the rear chambers. There the night air was sweeping in through an open window, to the sill of which Nick quickly sprang.

Now the noise he had heard was instantly explained.

Cornered like a rat, yet viciously resolute to the last, Kilgore had, in order to make his escape, resorted to a means from which a less cool and nervy scoundrel would have shrunk on such a night as that.

He had, by reaching far out of the window, been able to grasp an old-fashioned lightning rod with which the ancient wooden mansion was provided, and by which he proposed to descend to the ground. Under the swindler's weight, the beating of this swaying rod against the side of the house was the sound Nick had heard.

Kilgore, whose courage was worthy a far better cause, already was halfway to the ground.

Yet Nick had no idea of letting the knave escape thus, and he raised his weapon to fire.

There was no need for a bullet, however, for the hand of the Almighty did the work.

From the black vault of the heavens a bolt of liquid fire suddenly shot earthward, with a crash of thunder that seemed to rend the entire firmament.

The fiery bolt reached the earth—but it reached it through the rod to which Dave Kilgore was desperately clinging.

Not a sound came from the doomed man as he went down—or if there was a sound, it was drowned by the deafening crash and successive reverberations of thunder.

Before Nick had fairly recovered from the blinding light and terrific concussion, he heard the voice of Chick yelling loudly from below:

"Nick, Nick, come down here! The house is afire. The whole house is afire!"

Nick heard and darted for the stairs, at once realizing how well the lightning had done its terrific work. Before he could reach the lower hall, dense volumes of smoke were pouring through the house, and one entire side of the fated dwelling was in flames.

Nick thought of the woman in the cellar below, and, with Chick and Patsy at his heels, he led the way to the diamond plant. The electric light had been extinguished by the lightning stroke, but Nick soon located the body of Cervera, and together the detectives brought her out and laid her upon the ground some rods away from the burning dwelling.

"She's done for, poor wretch!" muttered Nick, as he looked at her bloodless face.

He was right.

Señora Cervera had danced her last dance—a terrible one it was! She had lapsed into a merciful unconsciousness, from which she never emerged.

Next came Kilgore, and they easily found him. He lay stretched upon the ground, dead and scorched almost beyond recognition, at the base of the metallic rod through which he had met his fate.

"Lend a hand here," said Nick. "We'll place him with his confederate until we can have them properly removed."

"So be it," said Chick, gravely. "It's about the last we can do for them, and this nearly ends our work on this job."

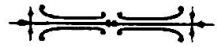
"You've got the others?"

"Every man of them."

"Well done!" nodded Nick, as they raised the lifeless form between them. "Behold the way of the transgressor."

"Hark!" exclaimed Patsy. "There goes the fire alarm. In three minutes there'll be a mob about here."

"Much good the firemen will do," rejoined Nick. "That house is doomed, and all that's in it."



He was right. With the passing of the tempest, and the first sign of a star in the eastern sky, all that remained of the house above the diamond plant was a heap of red, smoldering embers, filling the cellar and the secret chamber—and blotting out, though perhaps not forever, the secret art of that misguided genius, Jean Pylotte, dead with a bullet in his brain, on the floor of Rufus Venner's hall.

There remains but little to complete the record of this strange and stirring case.

Before morning Nick had lodged Venner and Spotty Dalton in the Tombs, and had Garside arrested at his residence. The lifeless bodies of their three confederates,—Cervera having died at dawn—were taken to the Morgue.

Early the following day, Harry Boyden, the young man arrested for the murder of Mary Barton, was discharged from custody, and hastened to the home of Violet Page, to make her happy with the news of his release and his story of Nick Carter's extraordinary work. Both called upon Nick a day or two later, and expressed their gratitude and affection in terms which here need no recital. Incidentally it may be added that they were married, as planned, the following summer.

How strangely the circumstances and experiences of life are knit and bound together. But for the vicious crime of a jealous woman, Nick might have labored long, and possibly vainly, to run down the Kilgore gang and their extraordinary criminal project, in which Cervera so strongly figured. It was as Nick said, the two crimes seemed bound together as if with links of steel.

In the trial which preceded the conviction and punishment of the three living members of the gang, Nick learned all of the facts of the case.

Venner & Co., it appeared, were on their last legs, and went into the game to square themselves, the design being to market vast quantities of the artificial diamonds. With this project in view, Venner had purchased the house at the rear of his own, under the name of Dr. Magruder, and there had established the plant. How well the scheme would have succeeded, but for Nick Carter, will never be known.

At all events, in the stock of Venner & Co. were found numerous stones which only the most proficient experts could prove to be artificial; and even to this day it is intimated that, among the bejeweled women of New York there are some unconsciously wearing the manufactured diamonds of Jean Pylotte. What matters, however, since where ignorance is bliss it is folly to be wise?

Jean Pylotte: His art died with him, alas! For in the ruins of the diamond plant there could be found no evidence sufficient to reveal his great secret.

Surely it had opened the way to a great swindle, the possibilities of which can hardly be conceived. But, fortunately, in the way of it had come—

Nick Carter.

THE END

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